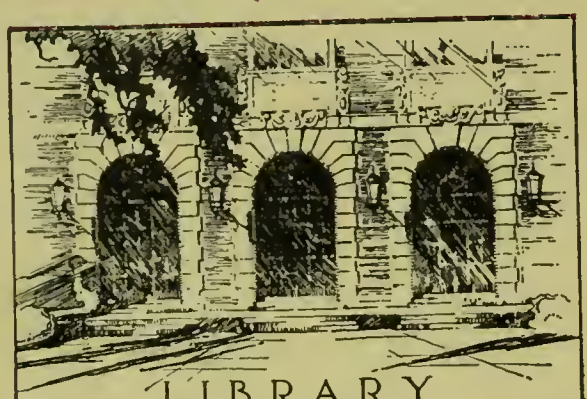

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A WANDERING STAR.

A WANDERING STAR

BY

LADY FAIRLIE CUNINGHAME

AUTHOR OF

"THE SLAVE OF HIS WILL," ETC.

IN THREE VOLUMES

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A WANDERING STAR.

CHAPTER I.

"He telleth the number of the stars, and calleth them all by their names."

"ENCORE deux billets . . . . ste-el two teeckets," shouts the pale-faced croupier of the *petits chevaux* table, which to-night is drawing greater crowds than ever into the great domed hall of the casino at Dieppe.

The croupier has been shouting himself hoarse the whole evening; the Japanese bowl, with the green or blue tickets stuck into its notched rim, has been handed to every one within the range of his long arm; the little horses, marshalled in a row, seem in a hurry to be off; the crowd are standing three deep round the strong iron railings that

enclose the croupier and his miniature race-course; and five-franc pieces are handed across people's shoulders, and over the flower-decked bonnets of a few fat Frenchwomen, who, in spite of the stifling heat, sit the whole evening closely wedged together, below the level of those who stand around.

An altercation takes place from time to time, about the money that is staked.

If the Republican Eagle does not flap his wings on these five-franc pieces, and if his counterfeit is replaced by the arms of Mexico, then is the cart-wheel politely returned, and a war of words is the result.

Whizz!—the horses go round!—the fat Frenchwomen feel that their fortunes are at stake, and with strained eyes follow the gyrations of the *gris*, the *noir*, the *alezan*, or whichever horse they have drawn in the lottery.

Two or three turns round the table, and then the gallop ends in a walk; No. 1 and No. 5 seem to be making a dead heat of it; shrieks come from the holders of those numbers; careful measurements with a string are

taken by the croupier, and then, without even a glance at the owner of No. 1, who is appealing to all the gods for aid, he places eight of the clumsy pieces into the skinny hand of a terrible old hag, who has got a pile of similar coins before her on the railing.

The heat is African, the odours unspeakable, and seem composed of equal parts of gas, paraffine, and patcheouli—the company could not be more mixed! A band of smart young men in evening clothes, and light overcoats, who answer to the proudest and best known names in France, have come over from Trouville for the races, and represent "le sporting"; in other words, all that is most *chic*. Beside them, a party of Dieppe shopkeepers sit at their ease on one of the crimson velvet sofas that line the walls.

Respectable country people, from many a Norman *gentilhommerie*, have driven in for a gay evening at the casino, in the one week in the year that Dieppe is *en fête*.

Members of *la haute cocotterie* walk round the tables, generally two together, and arm-in-arm; their clothes strike awe into the

stoutest heart, the pearls or diamonds in their ears are of fabulous size, and the priceless Valenciennes lace that edges their skirts and petticoats, sweeps the dust and dirt of the casino floor.

The English colony at Dieppe hang a good deal together, and form a little society of their own; but Russians, Germans, Roumanians, Bulgarians, are more cosmopolitan, and are all represented here.

Every one talks a different language; it is the Tower of Babel over again.

Outside, on the terrace, a light breeze blows, a thousand stars are shining, small waves break gently on the shingly beach, and in the intense stillness one hears the wash of the waters, that suck back the smooth pebbles as the tide falls.

But there is no one to mark the beauty of the night—the world in general prefers the crowd, noise, and vulgarity inside.

Among the throng we have not yet noticed a party of good-looking people who stand somewhat aloof from the table, and from those who surround it, though one of the

men of the party now and then joins in the crowd, and wins or loses many five-franc pieces.

There is no doubt of their nationality. English is written in every line of face, figure, dress, and general appearance.

Truth to say, we do not think they are the worse for it!

The two good-looking men in blue serge, and the two pretty women who wear the same useful material, hold their own here without much trouble. To be sure, the enormous erections of ribbons and feathers, and the hats enwreathed with flowers, that crown the French female head make the Englishwomen's sailor hats, whose only adornment is the Squadron burgee, painted on the white ribbon, look noticeably plain, but their simplicity is a positive relief to the eye, and very handsome are the faces that they shade.

The elder of the two, the one with the dark hair, flashing eyes, and brilliant colouring, is Lady Julia Damer, a very fashionable lady indeed, and wife of the tall, good-looking man who is staking his five-franc pieces

at the tables. He is the owner of the schooner yacht *Gitana*, R.Y.S., at present lying inside the basin in Dieppe harbour.

Her companion, without being quite a foil to her, is decidedly not a rival, for Lady Julia is an acknowledged beauty, and Cissy Grahame is only a moderately pretty, very smart little girl, who looks well everywhere, never is out of place anywhere, and is the chosen companion of many pretty fast married women, without being particularly fast herself, for she knows when to efface herself, and when to come to the front, and reaps a good many advantages from her different friendships.

Brian Beresford, the fourth of the party, is the very type of a well-looking, well-mannered, and well-born young Englishman. He is a great friend of Colonel Damer's, and a still greater friend of Lady Julia's! It is her Ladyship's habit always to have an adorer, but as a rule their adoration is rather a one-sided affair. She is not so indifferent this time—she never does things by halves; and certainly, if exaction and jealousy are signs

of the master passion, then she is indeed in love with handsome Brian Beresford. She is even capable of being jealous of Cissy Grahame, who is incapable of giving her the least provocation, and she is annoyed, in spite of her own sense of the absurdity of it, every time he looks at the pretty, or noticeable, or outrageously dressed women, who pass and repass before them.

"Look at that girl, standing near the door," says Brian suddenly to Colonel Damer, as the latter returns from one of his fruitless expeditions to the tables, where the little horses gallop round manfully, where the croupier, and an old Frenchwoman, in a large red hat, are shrieking against each other, and where he has left two or three more of his stock of five-franc pieces. "Tell me, did you ever see a more beautiful face? I don't think she can be anything but English."

Colonel Damer's eyes followed the direction in which Brian is looking.

"That girl over there, in the blue frock, do you mean? Upon my word, she is worth looking at," says the Colonel.

"She and that old man have been standing there ever since we came here," continues Brian; "and he has never taken his eyes off the table, except to write down something on a piece of paper—some sort of calculation, I expect, though surely no one could be lunatic enough to have a system at *petits chevaux*. After no end of writing, he suddenly took five francs out of his pocket, and put it into the girl's hand. She seemed to know exactly what to do, for she dashed into the crowd, got a ticket from that scoundrelly-looking croupier, and went back to her father. I wish you had seen their faces when the right number was shouted and she went to claim the stakes! Joy is not the word for it, though the old man didn't look the least surprised. He seemed as if he had expected it all along. Look at them now. I believe they're going to do it again."

As he speaks, the old man hurriedly puts into the girl's hand two more large pieces; she once more mingles with the crowd, and, either because she is so slim and slight, or by reason of her firm resolve to reach the

goal, she makes her way right into the front rank, and is near enough to drop her pieces into the Japanese bowl, and to receive in exchange two blue tickets. The old Frenchwoman in the red hat is not yet appeased, and as she sits there, flushed and panting, her trembling hands are raised to the ceiling as she calls down maledictions on the pale-faced, hook-nosed Israelite, who she declares has cheated her.

The girl is wedged in among the crowd behind her, and her fair face looks fairer than ever by reason of the contrast.

It is a face that once seen might haunt a man for many a long day. The colouring is so lovely, the golden hair falls in such pretty curls on the low forehead, the small head is so wonderfully well set on the slender neck, and, above all, there is such a look of "race" in the girl's face and bearing that she seems curiously out of place, alone, in a noisy crowd, in a second-rate casino.

Her eyes are fixed on the little horses as eagerly as those of the ancient Jezebel who sits near her, her slim body bends over the

railings as if she could incite the grey horse to further exertions, her eyes shine like stars, and her lovely colour comes and goes.

On gallop the horses. Now they slow—slower and slower—and finally the grey horse is passed—*just* passed by the black!

"Numero 2 gagné," shouts the croupier; —the girl and the owner of the red hat are both plunged in the depths of woe, and the girl, with drooping head and sad eyes, slips out of the hurly-burly, and goes to rejoin her father near the door.

"Who, in the name of wonder, is that man?" says Colonel Damer, thoughtfully. "I have seen him before—I have known him—of that I am perfectly certain—but *where* is the question. Strangely enough, I seem to know the girl's face too; but that, I suppose, is quite impossible. I have it," says he at last, in great excitement, turning to his wife. "Julia, do you know who those are who are standing there? That is Ralph Fitzpatrick, and the girl who is with him is poor Lady Mary's daughter!

Can't you see it all? She's as like all the Vivians as she can be—that lovely hair, and all the rest of it, only that little waif and stray is the best-looking of the whole lot. Fancy running across them here! He has been *dead*—practically dead--for more than twenty years. I wouldn't have felt more surprised if he had really risen from the grave. Of all the downfalls I ever heard, Brian, there never was a downfall so sudden as his. He disappeared in one day. I daresay you are not old enough to have heard anything about it, and I forget the exact particulars. All I remember is that foul play at cards was proved against him beyond the shadow of a doubt, and from that day he was done for. He was one of the smartest and best-looking men in London—tolerably popular too. He had married Lady Mary Vivian, as nice and as pretty a girl as ever stepped. I knew her well, for the Vivians are cousins of my own. He had the ball at his feet, if you like—hard-up now and then, I dare say, but not more so than some of the rest of us; but he was always

full of plans and schemes, and this last scheme of his to *corriger la fortune* by the Polish trick at écarté was a fatal one. Lady Mary stuck to him in spite of the Vivians; we saw her death in the papers not long after he went under, but I had forgotten there was a child. As for him, I haven't set eyes on him for twenty years, and have hardly heard his name mentioned. One thing, however, I am quite sure of—that Ralph Fitzpatrick is standing there."

Brian listens with the most intense—the most eager interest.

"Don't you mean to speak to him, Damer? That unfortunate fellow has seen you, and recognized you. I saw his expression change a minute ago when he looked this way. It is an old story now, and if that girl's mother was a relation of your own, it seems a shame to take no notice of her child."

"Shall I?" says Colonel Damer, doubtfully. "I mustn't ask her Ladyship's advice then—she would put her veto on it at once; but it would be a shame to see Mary Vivian's

daughter, and to cut her dead. Poor things! I expect they're in low water too, and I might be of some use to them—anyhow, it could do us no harm."

"You're too late this time," says Brian grimly.

A crowd had surged through the great swing doors, close to which father and daughter had stood the whole evening, and the stream, as it passed, had carried them away in its tide.

The tall man, with stooping shoulders and miserable face, and the slim girl, in her faded cotton, had gone out into the night.

"Nothing to be done but to get back to the yacht now," says Colonel Damer, "and we must find out Fitzpatrick to-morrow, Brian. You needn't say anything about it to my lady, though."

Colonel Damer's worst enemies, if he has any, never impeached his bravery! Nevertheless Lady Julia's black eyes have a very subduing effect on him. It is a curious fact, and one of which her husband is well aware,

that she is nearly always right, and always has her own way.

"I have found out where Fitzpatrick lives," says Colonel Damer to Brian, as the two smoke on deck, after luncheon, the next day.

The awning is up—a necessary precaution—for the sun is burning, and the quay, alongside which the *Gitana* is moored, is lined with blue blouses, and market-women in high white caps and sabots, who halt on their journey from Le Pollet to the fish-market, to discuss the "yack" and its owners in broad Norman French.

Brian and the ladies have wandered about the town all morning. They have stood under the Gothic aisles and heard the organ play in St. Jacques—they have stept from its arched portals to the brightness and colour of the Place du Quesne on a market-day—have bought flowers and fruit from old women in bonnets blancs, sitting under the shade of huge red umbrellas—and have shopped in the Grande Rue, also full of life and colour, but whose shops, full of ivory, are

somewhat fly-blown and dusty, and whose last new Paris fashions are not so very new after all. Then past the fountain of the Rue de la Barre, and through the cool church of St. Remi—dark even on the brightest summer day—till they reach the casino, to look on the waves that sparkle in the lovely sunshine, and to see the shingly beach crowded with bathers and idlers of all sorts.

Lady Julia feels tolerably happy, for Brian seems more devoted than ever, and Miss Grahame effaces herself, and reads a "Tauchnitz" in a shady corner.

A cool, delightful luncheon to go back to is not the worst part of the morning's work; and cigars and coffee on deck, while the ladies are below reading novels, suits the two men exactly.

Colonel Damer goes on talking. "I am glad I have found out about Fitzpatrick, for I expect he, or, at any rate, that lovely girl of his, are a good deal in need of a helping hand. It seems they have lived here for the last fifteen years or so. If he had committed murder, I couldn't for the life

of me help feeling for the poor fellow. Fancy this place in winter, when the hotels and best houses and shops are shut up, and a northerly gale is blowing! It seems they can't even stay here in summer, they are so frightfully hard-up. They go to a village called Arques, about four miles from here, and live there among the peasants—as poorly as the peasants themselves, I expect. I'll tell you what I think of doing, Brian. When you and my Lady go to the casino this afternoon I shall charter one of those rattletrap pony carriages and drive there. He can't do me much harm at this time of day, and I want to see if I can be of use to poor Mary's daughter in any way."

"You *are* a good fellow, Damer," returns Brian; "you couldn't do anything better, and I will look after the ladies while you are away."

A long, uninteresting, dusty road leads to Arques. To an artist or student of history, its old castle, that stands on a height against the sky-line, is well worth a visit, and the church, which seems a good many sizes too

large for the village, is a fine specimen of Gothic architecture.

But neither castle, nor church, nor the beauties of the forest close by, have brought Colonel Damer out here.

He is listening to a man who has not spoken to an equal for twenty years, and whose feelings are not very well under his own control. The two are sitting in the low, dark-pannelled room of the "Chariot d'or"; coffee and liqueurs are on the table between them, but they are untouched.

"Know you?" Ralph Fitzpatrick is saying,—"why, you are hardly changed at all! Between twenty and forty there must be always a gulf fixed, but you are practically the same. What do a few grey hairs matter? Your eye, your look, your whole expression, are just what they were when I left the world. For I died twenty years ago, Damer; there is no blinking that fact. It is strange to look back on it, is it not? Think of the Ralph Fitzpatrick of those days! without a care in the world, except that there wasn't enough money going, and one night—*one* night—put

an end to it all. I cut my own throat; but how suddenly it all happened! I can feel the temptation as if it was yesterday. I was playing for hundreds at the 'Arlington'; I, who seldom had a spare ten-pound note—and losing—I wouldn't stop, and I couldn't pay. The devil himself reminded me of a trick that some kind friend had taught me, half in fun, once, in Paris—the Polish trick, they called it there—it was imagined to defy detection; I tried it—my hand shook—I did it badly, and I was lost. I wonder what would have happened had they not found me out? If I had been less clumsy, would I have held up my head among you all till now, or must I have fallen some other way? I remember little of what immediately followed—a death-blow doesn't really hurt much, and the power of feeling didn't return for a long time. We came over here. Mary, poor Mary! wouldn't leave me; but I didn't care much at the time if she did or not. That first winter, without a soul to speak to, nothing to do but to eat, and sleep, and keep oneself alive, was indescribable. I am

accustomed to it now, but it was different then. Mary bore that part of it bravely; the thing that killed her was when summer came, and we now and then met people we had known before. How well I remember seeing her face change one afternoon as we were sitting listening to the band at the casino! Some people passed us whom she had known pretty well at her old home—passed without a glance in our direction, though they knew we were there. I saw her face grow ghastly pale. Poor Mary! she had never been cut before, and before she grew accustomed to it she was dead. For me, I can hardly now recall the time when people didn't look the other way. I must say I don't give them much chance. I spend the whole winter at Dieppe, and play picquet for centime points, with grocers and shopkeepers, at their little club. I play honestly there, I give you my word, Damer," he says, bitterly. "After all, some of my present associates are as good company as many an English duke or peer, and perhaps better bred and better mannered than one

or two Royal Highnesses who were rather partial to my society in old times. There is only a fictitious difference in people after all."

"And your child," asks Colonel Damer,—"that lovely girl we saw with you?—this life is hard, indeed, on her. Do none of Mary's relations take any notice of her?"

"None of them," says Fitzpatrick, hopelessly; "while Mary was alive we had plenty of money; the Vivians wouldn't let one of their own want. But since she died her child is utterly ignored. A little money was bound to come to Vega through her mother—about as much as you pay your French cook, Damer!—and on that pittance she and I just keep body and soul together. But it's all a matter of comparison, as I said before. I am happy now-a-days when I can pay for a gloria after my coffee, or win an unexpected franc or two from my grocer friends at picquet. As for Vega, it is only now and then that I realize what a life hers is; I recollect, sometimes, how the girls of her class were cared for, and guarded; *she* has

had to drag herself up anyhow—*que voulez vous?*—no money, no friends, no position—one of the *enfants perdus* of this world; and yet, when I look at her, Damer, I believe she could hold her own anywhere."

"Hold her own!" repeats Colonel Damer, "she has the most perfectly beautiful face I ever saw, and I am not apt to be carried away by enthusiasm. She has Mary's charming expression, but she is far lovelier. Where is she, Fitzpatrick? I should like immensely to see her."

"She is in the garden, I dare say;" and her father rises listlessly and leads the way to the untidy, neglected garden, where vegetables, flowers, and kitchen herbs grow in unpicturesque confusion, and where two or three dilapidated arbours, covered with straggling vines, have been built for those patrons of the "Chariot d'or," who like to drink their "bocks" and smoke their villanous tobacco in the open air.

In one of these arbours they find Vega. The surroundings may be poor, but, after all, the vine-leaves make a perfect back-

ground for the beautiful little head. Colonel Damer thinks her lovelier far than when she staked and lost her money at the casino. He sits down beside her. He is more than double her age, but even at forty, though the mind of twenty can hardly grasp the idea, a man can still have some feelings left! He finds her not only lovely, but sweet and charming; and he stays on and on, double the time he had at first intended.

His first words to Brian, however, when he gets back to the yacht, and the two are once more smoking on deck, are by no means suggestive of a mind at ease.

"I am in a terrible fix," says the Colonel, who, it must be acknowledged, is not only kind-hearted, but utterly weak whenever a pretty face is concerned. "I don't know what on earth to do, Brian; you must see me through it, somehow. Any man would have done the same. I was so delighted with that lovely child to-day that before I knew where I was I had asked her to come on board to-morrow! I told her father we would take her with us on our cruise, and

we would bring her back to Dieppe in two or three weeks. He seemed indifferent, and agreed as if it was the most natural thing in the world; but I wish you had seen her face! she looked positively transfigured. After all she *is* my cousin; why shouldn't I ask her on board if I choose? But the question is, who is to break it to Lady Julia? Couldn't you mention it in a casual sort of way at dinner, Brian, like a good fellow?"

Brian knows the high temper of his liege lady, and doesn't see it in that light at all.

"My dear Damer," says he, "I *can't* interfere about your guests. Lady Julia would shut me up uncommonly quickly. No, no! you have done a good action, and must take the consequences!—but here comes your wife on deck; why not tell her now, and I will help you as much as I can?"

Lady Julia comes up the companion as he speaks; she looks radiant. Brian has never left her side the whole day, and she has had the field entirely to herself, for Miss Grahame is a mere dummy. A crumpled

roseleaf can upset her Ladyship's equanimity, but to-day there has not been a drawback.

A charming costume—white serge; but white serge glorified with bands of gold embroidery, and a waistcoat one mass of gold, suits her fine figure to perfection; she is looking her very best, and she knows it.

"Now or never," whispers Brian to the Colonel, whom in his heart of hearts he infinitely prefers to the lady who considers him her especial property.

Brian is crafty. A lovely spray of Marshal Niels have been arranged for him by the flower-girl at the casino gates. He has gone himself to fetch it; he now begs Lady Julia to wear it. He puts a good deal of feeling into his voice, and he insists on arranging the roses himself on the beautiful shoulder. The attention pleases her, the contact of her lover's fingers soothe her, and she has even a smile for her husband!

"My dear Julia," begins the Colonel, "I have seen Fitzpatrick and his daughter to-day. Poor little girl, she must have an awful life of it! As she is a cousin of my own,

don't you think you could take a little notice of her?"

"In what way?" says "my dear Julia," firmly; she scents the battle from afar, and is ready for it.

"Well," answers the Colonel nervously, "we can't do anything for her here—besides, we sail to-morrow. She looks rather delicate (a pious fiction of the Colonel's), and would be much the better for a little change. What do you say to our asking her on board for a few days?"

"And be hampered with a bread-and-butter miss! a girl who might have dropped from the clouds, for anything we know about her. Well, that is asking a little too much!" and her insulted Ladyship looks an inch or two taller, and her eye flashes at the unheard-of insult.

"Why not, Lady Julia," says Brian in her ear, "if it would amuse the Colonel? It would be a capital plan, and I should have a chance of having you to myself now and then, which I don't often succeed in doing, now-a-days."

Her Ladyship looks at him keenly; she has no great belief in man—not even in Brian—but surely he looks too innocent to be in collusion with her husband! However, she is mollified, in spite of herself.

"I must say you never think of other people, Reginald," she says, severely. "A strange girl on board will be a frightful tax on me; and if she is a cousin, they are not relations to be very proud of. Well, all I bargain for is, that the visit will not last more than a few days, at the outside. How Pinman will grumble at having another girl to wait on! It was as much as I could do to get her to look after Cissy."

"You may relieve Pinman's mind at once," says Colonel Damer, half sadly; "she hasn't had much waiting on all her life so far, poor little thing, and she is so sweet and charming, I should think she would mollify even the great Pinman herself."

"So like a man," returns his wife scornfully, "always caught by a pretty face! Well, as you have settled that quite to your own satisfaction, and shown me your usual want

of consideration, I suppose we may as well go below to dinner. What is that you say, Brian ?"

Whatever Brian whispers in her ear, it seems to please her, for her Ladyship is radiant all dinner, does not refer to their new guest at all, and the Colonel thinks himself uncommonly lucky to have got off so cheaply.

CHAPTER II.

"A fair wind to your ship, and the storms aye ten miles to leeward o' her!"

BRILLIANT sunshine — a flat calm — the pleasant land of France lying like a blue cloud along the horizon, and the *Gitana*, with idly flapping sails, drifting with the tide, and rolling just enough to give Lady Julia, who is an indifferent sailor, some real cause for complaint.

The good yacht left Dieppe the night before, but the light breeze that they hoped might strengthen by the morning, has died away, and they can neither get backwards nor forwards.

The air is warm, balmy, almost perfumed, and for those who wish to rest, or love to do nothing, what can be pleasanter than to lie at ease on a white deck, more asleep than awake? Colonel Damer is one of these

contented souls ; surely nature has intended him for a yachtsman !

The easy-going, restful, unexciting life suits him to a turn. Lady Julia, sulky and blooming, and never satisfied anywhere, is, on the contrary, in what our neighbours would call *une humeur massacrante.*

She lies on deck on a pile of cushions ; a book is in her hand, but she seldom looks at it ; the steward brings her grapes and green figs, but they lie untouched on the deck ; the great Pinman is up and down the companion a dozen times, now with a gauze veil, now with some lace for my Lady's fair throat, now to re-arrange pillows, that it seems impossible to place rightly.

Her husband bears the brunt of her reproaches, and is held personally accountable for the want of wind ; but her real grievance is that Brian has dared to leave her side, or her feet, or wherever he is wont to be found, and devotes himself to this new girl—this "mere waif and stray," as Lady Julia calls her. "Under my very eyes too!" muses her Ladyship, as she watches Vega

Fitzpatrick flitting about the deck, followed either by Brian's admiring eyes, or by Brian's delighted person.

The girl is in the seventh heaven of happiness, and she half fears she must wake and find it a dream. By what merit of her own has she been promoted from the dusty roads round Arques—the dilapidated arbours of the "Chariot d'or" garden—the company of a broken-down man, who hardly cares if she is alive or dead?

Her feet seem hardly to tread the white decks. The cabins below look like fairy land. If the strongest breezes that ever sent the *Gitana* eight knots an hour through the green waters blow their hardest, or if they are becalmed for a week, it is all one to her.

Is she really Vega Fitzpatrick, who wandered alone in the Arques fields three days ago? Is it in heaven, or on earth, that the "Garden of Sleep" is being strummed on an indifferently-tuned banjo? And have Brian's blue eyes and his merry face their match on earth?

"I never saw anything so disgraceful as

the way that girl runs after Brian," says Lady Julia to her *âme damnée*, as she and Miss Grahame watch Vega, with Brian in close attendance.

Lady Julia has flirted steadily, and with *malice prepense*, for the last dozen years; indeed, from her very cradle the admiration of man has been to her as the breath of her nostrils.

"She talks, and laughs, and is as much at home with him as if he were her grandfather. He positively can't get away from her. But what can one expect from a girl brought up anyhow abroad? And look at Reginald, showing her the sky, or the sea, or I don't know what! He is quite infatuated too. Reginald, of all people!" and Lady Julia laughs scornfully.

Cissy Grahame does not say much—she knows better. Half her success in life is due to her letting other people talk, and the other half to never repeating what they say. She is *bavarde, mais cachottière*, with a vengeance!

"How differently a well-bred English girl

would behave!" continues Lady Julia. "I like a girl with some repose—some natural dignity. Time enough for her to put herself forward once she is married. Fancy what my sister Hermione would say if she saw her! Not that Hermione doesn't, perhaps, err the other way with her two poor little mice of girls;" and here Lady Julia laughs, and Miss Cissy discreetly joins in the mirth, for Lady Hermione's system of education is a bye-word.

She, too, like Lady Julia, had been a dark-eyed beauty—a fact she could not forget—and she seemed to bear a personal grudge to her poor snubbed little girls. At seventeen and eighteen they were still "the children," and treated much like state prisoners. She hoped the world would ignore them as much as she did herself. She dressed them in impossible clothes, and then complained of their clumsy figures and heavy faces; she forbade them to join in the conversation, and found fault with their *gaucherie* and bad manners!

"Well," adds Lady Julia, still laughing,

and mollified, as she thinks of the ridicule attached to her sister, "extremes meet; and between Pussy and Dottie on one hand, and this Miss Vega on the other, there is a certain amount of margin. I don't believe Brian can like being so much run after."

Miss Grahame is silent, being wise in her generation, and lets Lady Julia have her own way.

A lovely evening follows the cloudless afternoon. The *Gitana*, if anything, loses ground in drifting, and those on board are either ill-tempered, or bored, or indolent, or happy, as is their nature. It is warm—softly, deliciously warm—the warmth of sunnier regions than these—and the sky is a blaze of red.

"The dew is very heavy again to-night," says Colonel Damer. "You must put on a cloak, Vega"—he calls her Vega by right of relationship, and Lady Julia is annoyed every time he does so. "*You* are all right, Julia, in your big coat; but what can Miss Fitzpatrick put on?"

"Miss Fitzpatrick will put on nothing more, for the excellent reason that she has nothing more to put on," says Vega, gaily and undauntedly; "but don't mind me, Colonel Damer; I am not at all cold."

"But the dews are dangerous, and you will get your death. My dear Julia, haven't you a cloak to lend her?"

"I *have* a fancy for keeping my own things," says his wife, unpleasantly; "and I am so much taller than Miss Fitzpatrick: my cloaks would drag about the deck. I hate draggled clothes; but there is a boat-cloak hanging up below—she can have that if she likes."

The boat-cloak, an ancient Connemara, makes its appearance, and the girl rolls herself in it with that quick, intuitive skill in draping possessed by nine Frenchwomen out of ten—a trick she has acquired in the land of her adoption.

It does not hang round her in shapeless folds, as it might on some English shoulders—it drapes but does not conceal the lovely bust and slender waist.

"So theatrical, almost indecent," whispers Lady Julia to Miss Grahame; "and, do you see, she is not satisfied with one of them now. She must have Brian on one side, and Reginald—that ridiculous Reginald—on the other."

"Yours is the prettiest name I know," that "ridiculous Reginald" is now saying to her. "I never heard of a Vega before. What does it mean? How do you come by it?"

"My mother had a great fancy for it," answers Vega. "She died when I was quite a little thing, and father never mentions her name, so I can't tell you much about it; but I have her Prayer Book, in which she wrote my name before she died—'Vega,' and under it, 'He telleth the number of the stars, and calleth them all by their names.' I suppose she was sorry to leave me all alone, or, at least, only with father, and it pleased her to think of that text. But I know nothing for certain, Colonel Damer; it is all guesswork."

"Tell us what you have done with your-

self, Vega?" he asks again; "have you always lived at Dieppe?"

"I was born there," she answers; "but I think there was a time when we went from place to place. I am not sure, for I can't clearly remember any place but Dieppe."

He makes her talk on; her talk, half French, or rather French idioms freely translated, is very quaint and very original.

The two men are delighted with every word she says, and indeed any one would have found her charming even if her face had not been so very fair.

Hours and days succeed each other. To some on board time flies with lightning speed, and it seems as if it could not make enough haste to join the unreturning past. To Lady Julia, on the contrary, the hours are leaden. The calm has long ago been succeeded by a fair breeze—the very wind they have been praying for to take them down to the West—but the *Gitana* never hurries herself, and Vega's pretty eyes have plenty of time to gaze their fill on the

chalky cliffs of Old England as they run down the Channel.

They pass the woods of the Isle of Wight —a broad belt of green between the undercliff and the sea, and they sight St. Catherine's light and the Needles—those great, grey rocks hollowed by the tides into endless caves and arches, and worm-eaten, as it were, by the force of the waves, which guard the entrance to the Solent. They see at a distance the white villas of Bournemouth, and Christ Church standing like a great cathedral against the skyline—then, along the shores of Dorset, the bold outline of St. Alban's Head breaking the low range of downs, till they reach the lovelier coasts of Devon. Dawlish and Teignmouth gleam white and shining among wooded glades; Torquay, on its terraced hills, looks like an Italian town, and the trees and woods in full foliage make a rare contrast to the pinky-red Devonian soil.

They leave Torbay to the right, and sail along the cliffs and among the rocky islets between Torquay and Dartmouth. The

breeze is, if anything, too fresh, and to Lady Julia, who hates the motion and keeps to her cabin, it is gall and wormwood to hear Vega's light steps above her head, her merry voice in her ear.

"Now, Miss Vega, look out!" says Brian, and how bright and happy his voice sounds too; "we are coming to the loveliest entrance to the loveliest harbour in England."

They are sailing up the narrow passage that leads to Dartmouth. Even Lady Julia cannot now complain of the motion, for the high land on both sides protects them from every blast. They pass the Castle, enter the harbour, take up their moorings close to Kingswear, and Vega sees spread before her eyes the prettiest sight they have ever rested on. More than one hundred yachts are anchored in that land-locked bay —crowded together, stem and stern; every size and rig are to be seen, from the stately 600-ton steamer down to the smallest cockle-shell that can be called a yacht. All are dressed with flags—the display of bunting on some of the larger yachts is wonderful—

they have awnings on their decks—boats and steam launches are flying about the harbour, and some boat-races are going on.

On the shore flags are also flying—the Dartmouth quay is crowded with figures in holiday attire—the green seems a mass of white tents—a sound of fiddling and drumming comes from the land. What more need be said? Dartmouth is in the height of its three days' season—in the eyes of its inhabitants the best three days in the whole year.

"Now, Vega," says Colonel Damer, "what do you think of all this? I hope you will have some amusement at last."

"I couldn't be happier than I have been this last week," says she, looking up in his face with lovely eyes full of gratitude. "I never knew what happiness meant before!"

"Oh! we'll do better for you still," says he; "you deserve anything for the way you stood last night. The old *Gitana* tumbled about a good bit, but you are a born sailor, a girl after my own heart! I say, my Lady," he calls out to his wife, who makes her

appearance on deck at last, "let's settle to go ashore after dinner, and show Vega the dancing on the green, and all the sights of the fair!"

"I don't at all see why I should be dragged ashore," returns Lady Julia, her head in the air; "it wouldn't amuse me in the least. But pray don't let me keep you from going. Cissy and I can make ourselves quite happy on board, and I should think it would be just the sort of amusement that would suit Miss Fitzpatrick."

Vega was not very experienced in the ways of the world, but she could read between the lines as well as most people. Her pretty face turns rosy-red, and she makes a sad mistake by turning to Brian, as if for protection.

He throws off all allegiance to Lady Julia on the spot.

"Well! Miss Vega, Colonel Damer and I are the best of chaperons. Trust yourself to us, and we will promise to show you round, and you shall have a dance on the green too! One must be very young to

enjoy dancing on the green, but I think you are about the right age!"

"I am glad you think so," she laughs merrily; "for I mean to do it whether you approve or not. It's the only kind of dancing I have ever had. I used to go to all the village fairs and fêtes when I was a child in the villages round Dieppe—so I shall be more at home than you are."

* * * * *

"Here we are at last!" says Brian, three hours later, as they land on the steps that lead to the green.

The harbour looks as pretty by night as by day. Some of the yachts are dressed with Chinese lanterns, and some are sending up fireworks; fireworks are going up from the shore, and the lights of the fair, and the coloured lamps that hang from the trees add to the general effect.

They make their way to the dancing ground—the green is crowded—the band plays loudly—spectators stand in a circle three or four deep; groups climb on the raised mounds that surround the trees; the

dancers are very mixed, but the *tout ensemble* is charming. Now a tall man in yachting clothes and a yachting cap waltzes smoothly round with the reigning beauty of the last London season, the uneven ground not seeming to put them out in the least. Now a yacht's sailor jogs past, with a "girl of the people" in a bright hat and feather—now high, now low, but all bent on amusing themselves.

"Let us dance too," says Brian, and in a moment he has Vega in his arms. "You *are* a born dancer," he adds, as the two rest their backs against a tree after a long—a very long—turn. "Some people plough through the gravel, but you skim. I have had a hundred dances on ball-room floors that were as smooth as ice, which weren't half as good as this; let us go on, Vega—on, till the very last bar of the music, and then you must come with me, and I will show you all the sights. We won't wait for the Colonel; he knows plenty of people—he's all right; besides, I want to have you to myself this evening—one may never have such a chance again. Are you agreeable?"

His eyes look into hers, and he would be blind indeed did he not read his answer in them.

The music ends with a flourish—the dancers scatter. Brian and Vega, arm-in-arm, like real lovers, wander through the fair. They are more like children though! Side by side they sit in a booth, and see a panorama of the Siege of Sebastopol; then the waxworks are visited, and the shooting galleries, but the fat lady is avoided, and to the Siamese twins is given a very wide berth! They ride on horseback on the merry-go-round, while the loud, harsh organ (round which they pivot) grinds out "White Wings." Some of the riders are solemn, as if they were the cynosures of all eyes in the park. Others have more *abandon*, and a yacht sailor sits with his face to his horse's tail! Pinman goes round grimly in the company of the steward of the *Gitana*; she would not smile for the world, but others smile and laugh too, and here and there a brown hand and strong arm is wound round a slender waist.

The bystanders around laugh, the music is deafening, and after two or three rounds, Brian and Vega jump down and wander on.

"Let's get out of this crowd," says he, suddenly. "Anything to be out of reach of 'White Wings.' They find a corner, not far off indeed, but deserted and quiet; they sit down on the wooden bench and rest.

He does not talk or even try to make conversation; instead of that he takes her hand, and she does not draw it from his strong, eager clasp.

Lady Julia seems a hundred miles away—so does the fiddling and dancing at the fair. His blood runs hotly in his veins, and Vega, for the first time, knows what it is to love. The two blond heads are dangerously near each other; her lips, sweet as the petals of a wild rose, are close to his. But whose voice, full of suppressed anger and emotion, falls on their ears? and whose erect and stately figure stands black and forbidding against the background of light?

"Lady Julia!—you here? You have come ashore after all!" exclaims Brian, in

a voice which cannot hide his great, his horrible annoyance. "And Miss Grahame too! fancy you wandering about here alone. Have you not met the Colonel?"

"We were tired of each other's company —bored to death on board," answers Lady Julia, "and we came to see how you were all getting on. You seem to be getting on capitally. Pray what have you done with Reginald, Brian? and in what part of the world is it the fashion, Miss Fitzpatrick, to leave your chaperon entirely in the lurch?"

"We only danced a little," stammered out Vega, "and when the dance was over we didn't see him."

"So I can well believe," says her Ladyship, in her most unpleasant voice. "If these are your Dieppe manners I can't say I admire them!"

She sweeps on. Brian knows better than to let her go alone, and the two girls follow. Lady Julia goes straight to the point, and her eyes flash as she turns them to her companion, speaking at the same time with much heat and violence.

"You are making a perfect fool of yourself, Brian! Remember that that girl and her father are—outcasts—outlawed, for all I know. I don't care whether you turn her silly head or not. I dare say she has had plenty of affairs with Dieppe young men already; but I won't have any folly on your side going on while you are with us. No man in his senses could marry a daughter of Ralph Fitzpatrick. Why his very name is a byword!"

Her Ladyship says no more, nor does he answer. One thing is certain: her words, in spite of himself, make an impression on him.

* * * * *

Fifteen days have passed since Vega sailed in the *Gitana*. For fifteen long summer days has this forlorn, neglected girl tasted perfect happiness, and of how many ordinary, humdrum, long-lived people could as much be said?

Lady Julia's sneers scarcely affect her—Lady Julia's undisguised animosity does not trouble her.

They sail in halcyon seas; they wander

from place to place—the days are too short for her happiness, and she grudges the hours that must be spent in sleep.

And now they are in the Solent, and the *Gitana* lies at anchor in Cowes Harbour. Vega must perforce content herself with the pleasures of hope, for Brian has had to leave them for a week. He has long since pledged himself to a voyage half round the world with a friend the ensuing winter, and many preparations must be made, though at the end of that week he is to return on board without fail. Then, as Colonel Damer says, "We will run over to Antwerp, or Ostend, and won't take Vega back to Dieppe till the very end of our cruise. In the meantime," he adds, "I shall take the opportunity of going up to London for a night to look after some business in the City, but I shall be down again without fail to-morrow evening. You three ladies must take care of yourselves and the yacht while I am away."

Vega does not like it at all. It is quite a case of two to one, for Lady Julia and Miss

Grahame make it very clear that they have nothing in common with her in any way.

Colonel Damer leaves them, and things go on as might have been expected—Lady Julia and Cissy are inseparable, Vega is alone. The two friends sit on deck all the morning, and as it is bright and sunshiny, and as Vega does not wish to make an unwelcome third, but finds the cabins hot and close, she takes a book and sits half way up the companion.

The sound of talking reaches her, but not the words, till Lady Julia's voice, in louder tones than usual, falls on her ear :—"His mother is evidently desperately alarmed. I know what her letter this morning meant very well. Some kind friend has told her about her precious Brian's flirtation with this girl, and now she as good as taxes me with having shady people on board. I believe she thinks he will marry her."

"Are you quite sure he means nothing serious?" asks Cissy, in her smooth, uninterested tones.

"Serious! Why? The man's not an

absolute fool!" says Lady Julia, in a voice of actual pain. "Fancy a Beresford marrying a daughter of that black sheep Ralph Fitzpatrick! No, no! he won't go so far as that; but in the meantime *I* am to be called over the coals, as if it were my fault—as if I could have prevented Reginald picking up a stray, unknown girl at Dieppe!—the daughter of a man whose reputation is European—people without a penny, and with as good as no relations in the world, for not one of the Vivians will look at them."

Can it indeed be about her and her father that Lady Julia is speaking? Is this the key to the riddle that has so long perplexed her—the real meaning of the life they have led?

Vega has no strength, no power to move, and Lady Julia goes on,—

"I would give anything in the world to get her out of the yacht. You know I always hate and detest girls, and have set my face against any of them coming on board. Hermione sometimes wants to put Dottie and

Pussy on my shoulders, but I always get out of it. If I refuse to oblige my own sister, it is hard indeed that I should be held responsible for a girl of this sort. If Brian was fool enough to marry her, not one of the Beresfords would ever speak to me again."

Half an hour later Lady Julia goes below to write letters; Vega is in the saloon, and as her Ladyship sits down at the writing-table the girl comes and stands beside her.

"Is it true, Lady Julia, that you are ashamed to have me with you? Do you want me to go away?"

The words sound determined; but oh! how beseeching and pitiful is the tone in which they are spoken. If she was begging for her life she could not beg harder for mercy.

Lady Julia is taken aback, and for a minute she all but leans to mercy's side. Had the girl looked less beautiful, who knows but her better feelings would have won the day?

"I do not understand you!" at last she says, coldly. "If you have overheard any-

thing not intended for your ears it was your own fault, Miss Fitzpatrick."

"I didn't understand it before," goes on Vega, in an uncertain broken kind of voice. "At Dieppe it must have been always kept from me, but I suppose it is all true, and that we are outcasts, as you say. That is the reason we have lived away from every one. Shall I go back there now, Lady Julia? I suppose it would be better?"

Lady Julia has a merciful impulse once more.

"I am very sorry indeed,"—and she stops—her better feelings are quenched, and this time for good. "Well, if you think it would be better to go back, and look after your father—you told me yesterday he wasn't well—you no doubt feel you have been long enough away, and could be of use to him, so perhaps it would be as well. It is quite easy for you to get away either to-day or to-morrow. Pinman shall take you as far as Newhaven. How would that do?"

Twice over Vega tries to answer, and twice over the words are choked in her

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throat. When she at last gets out "to-day," she falls to stupidly wondering if it is her own voice, for it sounds so loud and strange.

* * * * *

"So poor little Vega has been obliged to leave us, and to go and look after her sick father," says Colonel Damer the next night at dinner.

Lady Julia has condescended so far as to meet him herself in the gig at the Cowes pier—an act of friendliness which has both surprised and pleased him. "Poor little girl! I suppose she was obliged to do it, but I know it must have been a terrible disappointment to her. She was so looking forward to our next cruise. Well, we must have her over to stay with us when the yachting is over. By the way, my Lady, it was very kind indeed of you to spare Pinman. I am glad you didn't send Vega with any one else. Of course, if I had been here I should have taken her myself, but I suppose as her father was so ill there was no time to be lost. All the same, I think it was really good of you to put yourself out, for I know

how dependent you are on the great Pinman."

Why does the approbation of her husband annoy Lady Julia so much? and why, with so much on her conscience, should she wince at this unmerited praise? He will never know the truth. Cissy Grahame is silent as the grave. All the same, she answers angrily, "To hear you talk, Reginald, one would imagine that I was utterly selfish!"

"Not at all, Julia," says Colonel Damer, kindly; "it was only my stupid way of putting it. All I meant was to thank you for looking after poor little Vega when she was in trouble."

CHAPTER III.

"Not for mortal toiling nor spinning
Will the matters of mortals mend.
As it was so in the beginning
It shall be so in the end.
The web that the weavers weave ill
Shall not be woven aright
Till the good is brought forth from evil
As day is brought forth from night."

THE fruit from the Tree of Knowledge has been plucked with a vengeance, and the Vega who now wanders about the deserted streets of Dieppe and faces the northerly gale on the edge of its chalky cliffs is a very different Vega from the child who, in spite of having little to make her happy, was joyous as if fortune had smiled on her birth only a few weeks ago.

But she now knows—she *knows*—and the knowledge half kills her.

Lady Julia, to do her justice, told her but little, but her quick intelligence can piece together much that had baffled her before.

To be sure, she had taken little heed at the time, but seeds had sown themselves unconsciously in her mind, that now spring to life all of a sudden.

Does she not remember dimly a pale mother who seemed to be always weeping? Does she not realize all at once that every other girl in the world has some relations and friends, and that no friendly face or kinsman's greeting has ever come her way? Can she not recall, comparatively lately, a party of English, who sweep past her father and herself on the Casino Terrace with curious, half averted looks, and did she not wonder at the time at the strange pallor of her father's face after they had gone past?

It is easy enough to see when a hand holds high the light, and it is a very fierce light indeed that has been thrown on her father's past and her own.

In the greater sorrow all lesser ones are swallowed up, and Vega hardly frets at all,

or longs for the happy days on board the *Gitana* to return. Brian Beresford seems nothing to her now. She realizes clearly that she is not meant for happiness : it was more a dream than anything else, and like a dream it has faded.

The days seem suddenly to have grown a most interminable length, and all her simple pleasures have lost their zest ; she feels utterly depressed in her father's society, and still more melancholy in her own.

They have made no friends in all the years they have lived in that dull Norman town. The natives of such places never make the slightest effort to know any stranger, even though those strangers are all but naturalized by right of long residence ; and as for the " poor English " whom the fortune of war has cast on those shores to make the best fight they can for bare life, their manners, and habits, and ways, have always grated on Mr. Fitzpatrick. Whatever his past may have been, he will remain *grand seigneur* to the end of his days.

Lady Julia's words seem to have been

almost prophetic, for he has become very delicate and ailing this winter. His tall, slim figure is now thin to the verge of emaciation ; he stoops as he walks, and his face seems to have taken another expression by reason of the hollow cheeks and the features that seem all at once to have grown larger.

If Ralph Fitzpatrick has many faults, he at least can boast one negative virtue : he never complained of anything in his life, and he does not complain now.

Bon sang comes out in this characteristic, at any rate ; but he hardly eats at all, hardly speaks, and even his one amusement at the little club seems to pall on him. Vega would like to tell him her sorrow at his changed condition, but he will have none of her sympathy, and the gloomy figure cowering over the fire, or buried in a large arm-chair in front of the smouldering logs, tells on her nerves in the end, and drives her out of doors for more lonely hours and more lonely walks than ever.

A few of the shopkeepers look kindly on

la petite Anglaise, and chat with her when she comes to them to make her rare purchases, but her only real friend among them all is la Mère Thibaud, an old woman who sells chestnuts, and who sits at her stall under the arches that face the harbour.

Her friendship with Vega had begun when the latter was a mere child. The old woman, whose face was as rosy and as wrinkled as one of her own Normandy apples, had smiled from under the shadow of her great *bonnet blanc* on the pretty little girl from the first time she ever saw her, and fruit in summer and roast chestnuts in winter had cemented the friendship. Most of the *petit sous* that came into Vega's childish hands had been placed on Mère Thibaud's ample lap, and good measure, full and overflowing, was always meted out by those brown, wrinkled fingers to her little customer. She still buys chestnuts from her friend, but more for the pleasure of talking to the old woman than for anything else. Mère Thibaud, however, likes her chestnuts to be appreciated, and she believes that hers are larger, more mealy, and

hotter under their drugget covering than any chestnuts in the town.

We all like to shine somehow, and Mère Thibaud has no ambition, and few thoughts, beyond her chestnuts.

"You have forsaken me lately, ma petite mademoiselle," says the old woman to Vega, one afternoon, as the girl, after a long walk on the bleak sea-shore, stops at her stall, "and such a fine lot of chestnuts as I have had in lately. No, no, mademoiselle! no petit sous this time! Here are five of them all hot—all hot! A present from la pauvre Mère Thibaud. Eat them quick—ça fait du bien—ça chauffe l'estomac? And if their heat puts a little colour into your pretty cheeks, ah! tant mieux! What has come to you lately, mignonne? You are no longer gay or happy."

"And you look always happy, Mère Thibaud," says the girl, enviously. "Do you always feel it? Do you never want anything more than to sit here and roast chestnuts?"

"Not now," answers the old woman,

cheerily, and she certainly looks the picture of content. "Once upon a time, yes! when my son went away to fight the cursed Prussians, and never came back to his old mother. I was unhappy then—va! But one forgets, mademoiselle—at my age one forgets readily, and I don't often think of my poor Pierre now-a-days. It is past, and, as you say, I am quite happy roasting my chestnuts;" and Mère Thibaud bursts into song, if her thin little ghost of a pipe can be called singing:—

"A quoi pourrais-je prétendre?
Les petits vivent de peu,
J'ai du vin, et du pain tendre,
Et le soleil du bon Dieu!"

"I wish I was like you, Mère Thibaud," sighs the girl; "but I cannot keep from thinking."

"Naturally, mademoiselle, when one has no work to do, like the rich, one has time for that stupidity. If I was like one of you others, and had nothing to do but to wander on the pebbles of the beach, or lose my way in the forest of Tibermont, I, too, would

fret and be sad. I would think of my man who died forty years ago, and I would shed bitter tears for my Pierre, who was shot through the heart by a German bullet. But what will you? When I sit here I have my hands full looking after my chestnuts, and I must keep a sharp look-out on the boys too, the young thieves! Then I generally am too cold to think, and when I go home at night I am too sleepy, and in the morning I am too busy, for I have all my chestnuts to notch. It takes one all one's time to cut them properly—this way, and then that way, so, ma petite dame. So when have I time to sit with my hands before me and sigh? It's as much as I can do to say a prayer every day for my poor boy's soul; but that does some good; one must find time for that."

"How tired you must sometimes be, Mère Thibaud, working so hard, and doing the same things over and over again."

"I demand nothing better, mademoiselle. I shall go on till I am too ill, or too old, and then—why, then I must trust to my neigh-

bours and le bon Dieu. I have had no time to make my soul mais le bon Dieu n'est pas trop dur pour les pauvres. Il saura que j'ai fait mon possible."

Ten days pass before Vega's light figure is once more seen coming along the Arcade that leads her past Mère Thibaud's stall. The stall is there, and so are the withered apples, the wooden-looking pears, and the great pot full of syrup, and a variety of abominations which goes by the name of "Confiture de ménage."

The tripod stands in its usual corner, sheltered from the wind, and no doubt the smouldering charcoal is as red hot, and the chestnuts as well roasted, as if Mère Thibaud kept watch and ward over them. But "a girl of the people," with a brazen countenance, a *bonnet blanc* stuck rakishly on the back of her head, and a figure that boasts many generous curves, sits on the low chair formerly so well filled by Mère Thibaud's ample, if somewhat shapeless, form. She is surrounded by customers, who are all sailors. Their long fishing-boots come half-way up

their legs; their broad shoulders are clothed in the thickest of jerseys, and their bold, blue-eyed Norman faces look out from the shadow of huge sou'-westers. They are apparently bound for the fishing, and before starting are bandying words and cracking jokes with the girl, who is evidently giving them as good as she takes!

"Tenez! voilà la petite Anglaise," she screams, as Vega stops opposite the stall and looks about her in an uncertain way, as if she did not know who to ask for news of Mère Thibaud.

An old woman, with a face brown and wrinkled as a piece of discoloured parchment, and bent double with rheumatism, opens the door of the shop opposite, and proceeds to tell a long story in the vilest Norman-French. Vega, fortunately, is able to understand her, and to make out that poor Mère Thibaud has been very ill for the last few days, and has sent a message to her old crony that if *la petite Anglaise* passed that way she would tell her, and ask Vega to go and see her.

"And if mademoiselle will be so gentille," continues the old woman, "Nanette shall show her the way to the house of Mère Thibaud. Nanette, Nannette!" shouts she, till at last a little girl in a dirty black stuff frock down to her heels, and an equally dirty linen skull-cap tied tightly under her chin, leaves a distant gutter in which she has been playing, and at her grandmother's bidding consents to guide Vega to her old friend's house.

It is not far off, but a labyrinth of dark, narrow streets has to be threaded before they reach the door of a tall, dilapidated stone house, whose somewhat important entrance and the cut stone ornaments above the windows show that it must once upon a time have been a better-class home, though its present inhabitants are now the poorest of the poor.

"Montez, mademoiselle! You will find Mère Thibaud at the top of the house," says the dirty little girl, taking leave of Vega on the threshold, and disappearing as quickly as if the earth had swallowed her up. Vega,

feeling just a little frightened, climbs the narrow corkscrew stairs, black with age and dirt, and so steep that as she mounts higher she is glad to lay hold of the rope that runs along the wall as a balustrade.

A knock at the door on the topmost floor and a feeble voice bids her come in.

The girl enters, but finds a certain amount of difficulty in reaching the bed where the poor old chestnut-seller is lying, for the whole floor is covered with chestnuts. There is a small fire on the hearth, and they are spread round it as thickly as they can be made to go.

They form a golden-brown carpet everywhere.

The table pulled near the fireplace is also covered with them, and on the bed lie a pile of the shiny nuts, on which, with a feeble hand, Mère Thibaud is trying to make those scores that she believes can only be successfully performed by a master in the art.

The knife drops from her hold as she catches sight of Vega, and with a joyous, almost triumphant, smile she welcomes her.

"I knew you would come, mignonne, though Marie Amont told me I oughtn't to worry you, and that you wouldn't care if an old woman like me was alive or dead. But I said to her, only tell la petite mademoiselle, and she will be sure not to fail me. I wanted to see your pretty face once more, and I wanted to give you some of my chestnuts. Look at them there! All my stock for the winter came in yesterday, and I can't even get up to see what they are like. Old Marie spread them out for me; they're never dry enough after a long journey, and it takes a day or two before the poor things come right. But I will never watch them over the charcoal in the tripod again, or give five of them to la petite mademoiselle as she passes along under the arches. I am done for now, my dear. There isn't much to fret about; all the same, I said to myself, I should like to see mademoiselle once more, and wish her good-bye and good luck; for you have a long way to go, and are only just setting out on the journey that poor old Mère Thibaud is finishing. You take life hardly too, and

fret about I know not what. But take heart, if you do your 'possible,' mademoiselle, it will all come right in the end. I don't quite know where I am going, but I expect I shall soon see my Pierre again. Monsieur l'Abbé says that all good sailors and soldiers who die for their country go straight to Paradise, and le bon Dieu couldn't be so angry with me as to separate me from my boy. J'ai fait mon possible," and Mère Thibaud raises herself on her arm, and a gleam of sorrow comes into her eyes as she looks around on the floor strewn with chestnuts. "Take some, mademoiselle," says she, handing Vega a basket, which hangs beside her capacious many-pocketed blue apron at the head of her bed; "take a whole basketful, I beg of you. I can't carry my chestnuts away with me. I suppose one never eats or drinks, or does any work in Paradise," she adds, half regretfully, "and it would make me so happy to see you take a basketful."

Vega does exactly as Mère Thibaud wishes.

"I am so sorry, Mère Thibaud," she says, sadly; "I will miss you so very much."

A gleam of satisfaction passes over the old woman's face.

"I think you will, mademoiselle, for a good while, when you pass the corner of the Arcade; I am glad of that. I don't want you to be sad, but it won't make you very sad just to say now and then as you pass, 'I wish the old woman was here again,' and it pleases me to think of it. Perhaps I shall know as much as that where I am going."

Vega is as ignorant as herself about the unknown land to which Mère Thibaud is hastening, and all she can do is to stoop down, and kiss the wrinkled old face that is lying so quietly on the coarse pillow. Mère Thibaud is pleased, but Death is a regular Republican, and it does not seem strange to the old chestnut-seller that *la petite mademoiselle* should kiss her.

A little longer they talk, and then Mère Thibaud says good-bye to her as quietly as if they were to meet again in a short time. They shake hands, and it is only Vega who weeps.

"It is not even adieu," says the brave old woman; "we shall meet again in Paradise; it is au revoir, mademoiselle."

And so the little episode ends, but Vega Fitzpatrick realizes that she has one friend the less the next time she passes the corner where Mère Thibaud once reigned supreme.

"The girl of the people" is shouting and laughing with more sailors, and paying very little attention either to the chestnuts, or the charcoal fire, which has nearly gone out.

"Tiens! Tiens! la petite Anglaise qui se promène toujours," she calls out, as her bold, roving eyes light on Vega as she passes. "Oh! la! la! et la pauvre Mère Thibaud qui est pincée," and then bursting forth into song, she trolls out the appropriate ditty:—

"Je r'viens d'interrer ma tante
Voyez que j'ai la larme à l'œil."

The men laugh—the girl stamps her sabots to mark the time—and Vega hurries quickly

past the stall with a heavier heart than she could have imagined possible.

But greater troubles have now to be faced, and the poor old chestnut-seller is perforce forgotten.

CHAPTER IV.

"Real life is a race through sore trouble
That gains not an inch on the goal;
And bliss an untangible bubble,
That cheats an unsatisfied soul.
And the whole
Of the rest an illegible scroll."

THERE has always been so little sympathy between Vega and her father, and, in spite of the smallness of their poor home, they see so little of each other, that she does not notice the gradual decay of his strength. He has always been silent—always gloomy—always anxious to get away from her, and every one else, and she does not see that the silence and gloom is getting deeper, and that his wish for solitude is growing on him every day. He spends most of his afternoons and evenings at the *cercle*, and she does not know that he is sometimes so weak that

he can hardly manage to walk even that short distance, that he has before now sunk down on a friendly doorstep, unable to stand, or to drag his weary limbs home, and that the cold night wind seems to cut him in two like a knife.

But he is not of those who complain or repine, and he has taken his punishment in silence too long, not to suffer dumbly to the end.

"The Grasshopper has become a burden," but he will go to his long home without a murmur.

One night he and his daughter are sitting in almost total silence over their evening meal. She is accustomed to his fits of dulness and depression, and she takes little heed of them.

Custom makes us all sadly callous, and Vega does not notice that her father draws his hand constantly across his eyes, or that he moves his head in a restless uneasy way from side to side of the high-backed arm-chair in which he sits.

Her thoughts are far away; memory is

busy, and once more she is sailing over summer seas in the *Gitana;* she is building castles in the air like a mere child, and she hears Brian Beresford's voice again in her day-dreams.

A shadow across her plate makes her look up to see her father's head bent forward across the narrow table; he is looking at her with the expression of a demon—an expression in which spite, malice, and undying hatred seem blended. His eyes are starting out of his head, his lips are drawn back, and display his sharp white teeth; his colour is livid. The blood seems to run back to her heart all at once, for the sight of that convulsed face might well terrify her.

Is he going to spring at her? Will he kill her? He looks like a wild animal, and she feels she now knows how much he must always have hated her. He flings up an arm in the direction of the light that hangs from the ceiling above their heads, and then, as it falls, his hand knocks over the large old-fashioned glass decanter full of *vin ordinaire.* The liquid seems to come in a red wave right

over to Vega, but she cannot move; it rolls nearer, but she feels tied hand and foot, and tongue-tied too, so that she cannot scream.

The face that grins at her from the other side of the table, Medusa-like, has turned her into stone. Her heart all but stops beating, and another moment of such agony might well kill her.

But the silence is broken at last by a shriek from her father's lips, that shriek of one who is struck down by a fit which, once heard, can never be forgotten, and then his hands fall at his sides, the nerves that are like bands of iron relax, and he slips down from the chair, and falls a limp and inert heap on the floor.

The old woman who has been in their service ever since Mr. Fitzpatrick, for his sins, went into banishment, is upstairs, but when that shriek falls on her ears she knows what it means all at once, and in a minute she is with the distracted girl, and has got the poor victim in her strong, vigorous, Norman arms. It is but a skeleton that she carries

upstairs, and lays down on the bed from which it will never rise again.

She straightens the poor wasted limbs, piles pillows under the unconscious head, and fastens back the curtains of the old-fashioned French bed to give as much air as possible.

It is one of those beds, so common in France, that nearly fill a small alcove, and that with their thick curtains, and high wooden sides, have rather the effect of an ark in miniature—a bed that seems better suited to die in than for peaceful slumbers. Vega stands by the bedside shaking in every limb; her small face looks pinched and drawn, and the terror that seized her when she first caught sight of her father changed out of all knowledge, still masters her.

That face was like the face of a demon, and that shriek might have burst from the lips of one of the damned. She sees the one, she hears the other, and she trembles with fear and horror as she looks at the motionless figure stretched on the bed. Will he open his eyes again? Will she once more see in them that look of vindictive

hatred? Is he even now feigning unconsciousness, and will he spring on her as she stands there?

It is not the child who helps the father, it is Victoire who wipes the froth from his lips; Victoire who unclasps the clenched hands, for the nails of the long thin fingers are all but imbedded in the wasted flesh; and Victoire who, after one keen glance at the poor frightened girl beside her, tells her in a voice of authority as well as compassion, to go for the doctor as quickly as she possibly can.

The old woman knows perfectly well that that figure lying on the bed will neither move nor speak for hours, and that nothing could possibly happen were she to leave Vega in charge, while she herself went in search of help. But she is wise, and she knows that to be left alone in the house with the unconscious man would be more than the girl's nerves could stand. Better—a hundred times better—for her to face the bitter east wind, and any dangers of the night, than to be left alone in the house, to hear no sound

but the laboured breathing of the dying man, and to see nothing but that rigid form stretched on the bed.

It is a merciful plan of the quick-witted old woman.

Vega obeys her, and there is no doubt that the night air and the necessity of haste act as a sort of tonic to her nerves.

The doctor, quiet, kindly, and intelligent, is soon with the sick man. He does not say or do much, for there is little to be said or done, and there is no one to buoy up with false hopes, or to break sad news to in sym pathizing accents. The patient has neither mind nor brain to be touched with the tidings of death; his trembling child is too young and ignorant, and the old woman understands the situation thoroughly.

A prescription written in pencil on a leaf torn out of his pocket-book, a few words in Victoire's ear, a recommendation that the sick man should be closely watched, and that some one should sit up with him all night—and the doctor leaves the house, promising to return early in the morning.

But both he and Victoire know it is but the beginning of the end.

It is possible that the patient might get over his present grievous malady if there were any vitality or strength to come and go on ; but the last drop of oil is being burned in the lamp, and soon, very soon, there will be total darkness. Whether he will rally at all is a moot point ; if so, he will only suffer longer, and die by inches. The doctor is a materialist, and a merciful man ; and he hopes his patient will have a short shrift.

He had stood at Lady Mary's death-bed long ago ; and though he has stood at plenty of death-beds since then, he has never quite forgotten that one. He knows, half by instinct, half by help of a quick intelligence to which it is second nature to put two and two together, that things had somehow gone wrong with Ralph Fitzpatrick, and that he is a man to whom life is utterly valueless.

" One does not wish one's worst enemy prolonged torture or suffering, and still less to be forced to endure a life which is only so

in name," thinks the doctor, as he hurries down the Grande Rue in the teeth of the east wind. "When mind and brain are both gone, the sooner the heart stops beating the better. I don't see what would be gained by the contrary. If suffering purifies, I'll be bound Monsieur Fitzpatrick has had enough in his day without needing another turn of the screw! That poor fellow has had a living death for the last twenty years. I expect his purgatory began a good while ago: whether his sins have been expiated in the process, or not, I leave to Monsieur l'Abbé to decide. We others —we fathers of families—are generally of some use to our children, if to no one else; but I expect that poor little girl of his won't be much the worse for his death. Anyhow, it's coming. In a very few days he will be at rest at last."

Victoire and Vega sit up all night with the man who lies like a stone in the bed in the alcove. There is no danger of their sleeping on their watch, for both are over-excited, and both feel they are on the eve of

some great change. The old woman keeps up the fire, and goes backwards and forwards to the bed, and creaks about the room; but there is no one to notice the noise she makes, for the recumbent figure under the shadow of the heavy curtains neither hears nor sees, and the girl is buried in thought.

There comes a change with the dawn. As the light struggles into the room some life and feeling seem to return to Mr. Fitzpatrick. His eyes open once more, though they look dull and dead, and there is neither meaning nor understanding in their expression, but to the poor head comes some sensation of pain, for it moves uneasily backwards and forwards on the pillow, and the hands, which have lain like a dead man's hands on the counterpane, grope about as if trying to find something.

The two watchers stand beside him, but either he cannot see them, or he takes no notice of their presence. The fingers grope on—eye or brain does not seem to guide

them, but they are untiring, and twitch about without ceasing.

At last the dim eyes seem to brighten, and a ray of something like intelligence dawns. The fingers have found what they were seeking: they have picked up an imaginary pack of cards, and are now dealing them quickly and eagerly.

The dumb show seems to satisfy him, though whether he sees or feels those phantom cards between his fingers must remain for ever a moot point.

Over and over again the cards are shuffled, cut, dealt, and the trump card turned up — he is always the dealer — and sometimes he seems to play a hand. Sometimes that is omitted, and the shuffling, cutting, and dealing goes on without the intermission of the imaginary game.

A few words are spoken now and then, but they always refer to the business on hand, or to persistent bad luck.

"The devil himself couldn't play with such cards," he says angrily once: and the

shuffling and re-shuffling goes on harder than ever.

Later in the day the doctor comes and looks on, but his patient is too much occupied with his game to see him, and his hands wave in the air as he shuffles that ghostly pack. The doctor stands watching him for some time, and then he bends over him, taking one of the poor nervous hands in his own as he does so; and then, in a voice which sounds loud and almost dictatorial in the ears of his listeners, he asks him if he has no friend who could come to him—no letter to write—no business to attend to? He talks thus loudly in a vain effort to arrest the dying man's attention, and he stoops close to him as he repeats the question almost in his ear.

But no answer comes: no light of recognition shines in his dim eyes; and when the doctor lets go his hand, the nervous fingers return to their work once more.

The doctor shrugs his shoulders—not in indifference, but from utter hopelessness to make the dying man understand.

Were the wealth of all the Indies his to dispose of, and could one nod indicate his will or wishes, he would die with those wishes unexpressed.

He is not dead, but he is gone, and all that remains of life is to be seen in the mechanical action of those fingers that continue the avocation to which they have been so well trained.

"Don't leave him alone, give him nourishment if he can be made to take it, try and get mademoiselle to repose herself a little, and send for me if there is any change." These are the doctor's last words as he departs, leaving the dying man in the charge of a shrinking, frightened child, and of an old woman, who, good worthy soul as she is, has never felt anything but a distrustful antipathy to the gloomy distant man whom she has called "master" for many years.

She does her duty now as faithfully as if her service "was all for love, and nothing for reward." As it is, there is no love, and all her reward will be the consciousness of having done her duty, and stood by the

child whom she looks on almost as her own.

"The weary day rins doon, and dees,
The weary night wears through,"

and still Ralph Fitzpatrick is in no hurry to go. He lies in a state that is neither waking nor sleeping. It would be semi-unconsciousness were it not that his head moves always from side to side of the pillow, and that neither head nor hands can rest.

A few words spoken at long intervals show on what his thoughts are running, "honours," "tricks," now this card and now that, and ever and anon he rails at his ill fortune over some imaginary game.

The night draws on once more, and Victoire makes up a huge fire; she piles up the wood, and builds the *charbon de terre* above it with a much more liberal hand than is her wont; then she wheels two large arm-chairs close to the hearth. "Mademoiselle, you are tired, you did not close your eyes last night. I beg, I pray of you to rest a little, even to try and sleep to-night. You will be worn out, exhausted otherwise, and

there is much before you. Trust to me, my dear! Monsieur shall want for nothing. I will watch him so carefully while you sleep.

But the tables are turned, for it is Vega who does not close her eyes, and Victoire, who once she is comfortably settled in the large arm-chair in front of the warm fire, feels her fatigues of the night before and the weight of her sixty years too much for her, and after a valiant effort to keep herself awake, gives up the fight altogether, and sleeps the sleep of the just!

The firelight plays on the wrinkled old face that looks curiously dark and worn in the shadow of the high *bonnet blanc* that frames it; the figure lying on the bed is half hidden by the curtains; nothing is to be seen but the white hands and thin arms that move on without ceasing; the silence may be felt, and the girl's nerves are in such a state of tension that the slightest thing would make her scream out.

She has not the heart to disturb Victoire, but she wishes, oh! how much she wishes, that she would only keep awake!

She mends the fire with more noise than is necessary, but Victoire sleeps on, and it does not disturb her father's calculations for a moment.

The deep tones of the great bell of St. Jacques ring out hour after hour. Eleven! twelve! one! two! and still Vega is practically alone. And now her father begins to talk louder and more excitedly, and his head sways like a pendulum from side to side. His daughter steals over to his bedside; were she older, or had she more sad experience of illness and death, she would be struck by the curious change that has come over his face, and by the greyish-yellow pallor of his skin. But all she notices is that his hands move more and more feebly, though they are never still for a moment. Words that cannot be made out come from his parched throat and blackened lips; they pour in an incessant stream, and then all at once, with a convulsive effort, he half sits, half rises in bed. He looks full at Vega, but it is not her he sees, but some comrade of his early days.

"The king of clubs! Yes! yes! Philip, I did it, but the devil himself tempted me!"

The dying man makes one supreme effort as if to rise from bed, but a frightful spasm seizes him, while blood pours from his mouth.

Once more the red stream seems as if it was coming towards Vega. She gives a loud, terrified scream. Victoire awakes, and hurries across the room, but before she reaches the bedside all is over.

So died Ralph Fitzpatrick, neither repentant nor contrite. He made no "good ending" to a bad life, but at least he left the world with no falsehood on his lips.

He had sinned, sinned beyond the world's forgiveness, but his punishment had been a heavy one, and perhaps his evil doings were more than half expiated before his soul left his body.

CHAPTER V.

"We know not whether they slumber
Who waken on earth no more,
As the stars of the height in number,
As sands on the deep sea-shore.
Shall stiffness bind them, and starkness
Enthral them by field and flood?
Till the sun shall be turned to darkness
And the moon shall be turned to blood."

When the heart of man waxes faint within him by reason of sore trouble, he has at least one poor comfort.

The greater swallows up the less, and much passes unheeded by him which, were his grief less poignant, would prey on his mind and nerves, and make his sorrow still more unendurable.

But his head is bowed in the dust, and his eyes are blinded because of the desolation that spreads as a black veil around him.

All the sad details that jar on the senses, the miserable routine that must be carried out, the indifference of those who ought not to be indifferent, all is lost on those who are mourners in reality as well as in name.

Not so on those who count it as one of their chief misfortunes that they cannot sorrow enough. Not a pang is spared them of the minor troubles that follow in the wake of death, for they are alive to them all.

The girl who was now fatherless felt this all bitterly, and lonely and forlorn as she was, she suffered a kind of martyrdom.

Her father's sudden death shook her nerves; the dismal sights and sounds in the house before he was carried out of it dismayed her; the very absence of mourners, or even of an expression of sorrow from any one, hurt her.

There are also many melancholy avocations that are bound to fall even on the most broken-hearted after their dead are hid away from their sight for ever, and which, in spite of the pain they give, have their own drastic uses, for they rouse into exertion those

who feel that all is vanity and vexation of spirit.

But Vega has no duties at all to distract her attention ; no well-meant but stereotyped letters of condolence arrive, requiring long answers on deeply-bordered paper, and there is no necessity to talk business with any one, for there is nothing to discuss.

The pittance on which Mr. Fitzpatrick dragged out his existence is Vega's now, as it has always been.

There was none of that terrible setting in order of the dead man's possessions which makes those who survive feel like the thieves alike of property and secrets—there were no despatch boxes to be opened with a key which had never for a moment been out of its late owner's keeping—no business letters to be carefully examined—no money appropriated—no jewel-box rifled—no mine sprung in the shape of a bundle of letters in a woman's hand—no reflections made on the wisdom or the folly of the dead which a knowledge of his inner life now renders possible. No clothes lie in heaps on the floor to be

eyed greedily by paid retainers, and no souvenirs are despatched in the vain hope that now and then a thought of the dead may be evoked by their aid.

Naked we came into the world, and perhaps it is just as well when we quit it in much the same condition.

When there is nothing to leave behind there can be no heartburnings, and at least the mourners do not quarrel over the will when there is no document of the kind!

Mr. Fitzpatrick's valuables had long since disappeared—a few half worn-out clothes—a small desk that contained little but two or three photographs of a young, blooming girl in the garments of a quarter of a century ago, with "Mary Vivian" written across them—a few unimportant documents—and a letter ready stamped for the post—are all that can be found.

The letter is addressed to Colonel Damer, Conholt Park, Blankshire. There is no doubt what ought to be done with it, and Vega takes it herself to the post, little thinking how much the reception that

this letter may receive will affect her future life.

In the meantime the unexpected, as usual, arrives, and the girl, to her own great surprise, finds herself taken possession of by a family of whom she has known nothing, and cared less, but who have lived a careless out-at-elbows, happy-go-lucky life at Dieppe for almost as long a time as the Fitzpatricks themselves. They are Irish, and poor, and kindhearted; so Major Bushe forgets Mr. Fitzpatrick's steady avoidance of himself, and Mrs. Bushe forgets that some advice she once tendered on the subject of Vega's health was ill received by him, and the rough, unrefined, lively boys and girls forget how little they have always had in common with Vega, and before her father has been dead a week she has left for ever the house in which he lived and suffered for so many years, and which is all the home she has ever known.

Victoire is paid off, and with all her master's possessions to the good, with the exception of his old desk, she has

returned to the Pollet and the society of her equals, while Vega—poor little Vega!—has drifted for the time being into the Bushe family, and forms one of that unthrifty, untidy, but hospitable household.

She never for a moment believes that her visit to them will last more than a week or two at the outside, but, at the same time, she never reflects what is to be the next move in the game.

"We're delighted to see you, me dear," says Major Bushe, while Mrs. Bushe kisses her effusively; "stay with us as long as you like, me poor choild; the longer you stay the better we shall be pleased;" and if under the rose, both Major and Mrs. Bushe thought, and even confided to each other in the watches of the night, that her poor pittance would materially help their very embarrassed budget, no one could blame them, for that the Bushe shoe pinched most unpleasantly was an undisputed fact!

In the meantime let us follow the letter which Mr. Fitzpatrick had destined for Colonel Damer, and see what comes of it.

The post at Conholt Park arrives at breakfast time, and a more ill-timed hour, from Lady Julia's point of view, cannot be imagined. In her early married days, when young men not only loved her, but were capable of putting pen to paper to tell her so, she was always haunted by the idea that Colonel Damer might play the part of a jealous husband, and might insist on more than elegant extracts from her correspondence. In later days, when both young men and love-letters were not so plentiful, and when she had found out, partly to her satisfaction, partly to her annoyance, that her husband was incapable of jealousy, she has still an instinctive dislike to this public arrival of letters.

On the morning that Mr. Fitzpatrick's letter reaches Conholt Park both she and her liege lord are seated opposite each other, breakfasting at a small round table that is pushed delightfully near the fire. They are both arrayed for the chase, and he looks a model of all that a well-looking, well-turned-out, and well-conditioned Englishman

should look in red coat and faultless boots and breeches. She, however—always a remarkable-looking woman—is distinctly noticeable in her hunting things.

She is "more than common tall," and her splendid figure is literally moulded into the smartest of red coats. Lady Julia is one of the few who can afford to be daring in the matter of clothes; whatever she wears looks right, but woe betide those who attempt to imitate her! Her handsome, well-shaped head looks to greater advantage than ever now that the masses of dark hair that are its crown of glory are closely plaited in a neat, workmanlike coil. She can stand the severity of the man's tie, of the horse-cloth waistcoat, and the short, the very short, dark cloth skirt displays the most perfect foot that could be seen anywhere, and which now looks its best in the smartest of riding boots.

The Damers are alone, for a wonder, and as the meet to-day is not far from Conholt Park, they can afford to take time over their breakfast.

"What on earth are you frowning at, Reginald?" asks her ladyship, as, her own correspondence run through, she catches sight of her husband, who, with a face full of thought and care, is bending over a letter spread out before him; his breakfast is neglected, and Lady Julia's voice is unheard.

"I think you might give me a civil answer when I speak to you," she goes on. "I suppose some of your ridiculous speculations have gone wrong again. You will be hard hit one of these days, and you will have only yourself to thank. You know no more about business than my pug dog here, and yet you will dabble on at it, and only get laughed at for your trouble, and fritter away money that might be better employed some other way. But it is always the same, Reginald. You always think you must know better than any one else."

Colonel Damer looks up; he has not listened to Lady Julia's remarks, but instinctively he knows their drift. He looks at his wife for a moment critically.

"Shall I," he thinks to himself, "throw

myself on whatever good heart or good feelings she may possess? If I could only manage to make some suggestion of kindness come from *her*, we might yet do, for if I have to carry out any plan with her ladyship in opposition there will be the devil to pay with a vengeance. I have no great confidence in her mercy or goodness, I must say. She has never thought of any one but herself ever since I have known her, and I am not very sanguine that she will begin now. Well! here goes! I see no other course open!"

Aloud he says, "Read this letter, Julia. I am sure your kind heart will be touched by it, and I should like to have your advice about it all. Your quick mind will hit on some plan, I am sure."

Ralph Fitzpatrick's letter is in Lady Julia's hands, and she reads it attentively; it runs as follows:—

My dear Damer,—

In old days we were very good friends, though not such close friends as to warrant my turning to you as I now do. But when a man is between the devil and the deep sea, he is not apt to be over-scrupulous.

I shall be out of this world altogether before this reaches you, and my girl will be utterly friendless. I have no right to ask you to hold out a helping hand to her, and it is not even fair to put you in such a position. All the same I ask you to take some care of her. Think of her as Mary's child, not mine. After all she is of your own blood. You always were a good fellow, Damer, and I believe you will do this. So sure do I feel about it, that I have a certain amount of comfort now I have got this written. I don't know how you will befriend her, but you won't lose sight of the poor little thing. I am safe with you, though I bind on your shoulders a burden that I have no right to put on them.—Yours, &c.,

RALPH FITZPATRICK.

To do her justice, Lady Julia does not read these words quite unmoved. She is touched by their hopelessness, and even the feebleness of the shaky writing is not lost on her. She is not her hard, worldly, plain-spoken self for a minute or two.

"A terribly sad letter, is it not?" says the Colonel, as he watches with a certain amount of hopefulness the expression of his wife's countenance. "How that poor fellow must have suffered! He was always as proud as Lucifer, and he must have felt it a bitter pill to write as much as this even to me. Poor

Ralph! I suppose it was about the last ordeal that he had to face, but it is a mercy that he was able to bring himself to do it. What in the world would have become of that beautiful little girl of his if he had let us know nothing?"

Lady Julia's kindlier feelings are fast disappearing; she will soon be herself again.

"At the same time, Reginald, you must allow that it puts us in a very awkward position. This legacy of a girl of seventeen is very embarrassing, and I don't know in the least what you are to do. You never would be so mad as to adopt other people's children?"

"I ought to run over for myself and see how the land lies," says the Colonel; "for all I know Vega Fitzpatrick may be utterly forlorn and alone at Dieppe. It would be on my conscience for ever if after getting that letter I did nothing at all. The only way I can answer it is by going there myself."

There is a long pause; Lady Julia, for a wonder, has no answer ready; she is busy balancing the different pros and cons. She

is clever enough to see that she cannot make the Colonel ignore that letter altogether, and she means to reserve her strength, and show fight only if there should be any idea of bringing Vega over to England to make Conholt Park her home.

"She is practically uneducated," she thinks; "and school could always be suggested for a year or two—but in that case who would pay? Reginald has such endless calls on him, and I think he would be quite unjustified in accepting such a burden. There is no doubt that it would be much cheaper to let her come here for a time. But Heaven forbid that I, who always congratulate myself on having no children of my own, should be saddled with a ready-made daughter! That would be a little too much of a good thing! At my age, and with my looks, to sink into a chaperone! No, indeed! I wonder how it would do to get Hermione to take her? Hermione is so grasping, and so poor, that a very little money would tempt her, and it would do Miss Vega some good to be kept in the

background with Pussie and Dottie for a little ; there's always that plan to be thought of if the worst comes to the worst."

She once more addresses her husband. "You must promise me, Reginald, if you do go over there, to commit yourself to nothing without consulting me. Men never understand how to manage a girl, and you would be certain to blunder on some impossible plan if you attempted to interfere. To begin with, I think it utterly unnecessary for you to go to Dieppe at all. The Fitzpatricks are certain to have made plenty of friends of their own sort there. Some of them would be sure to do all that was needful. If I were you I should wait till I heard more."

"I have made up my mind, Julia," says the Colonel, in a determined tone, "and I shall cross to-night ; but I don't see any reason for losing a day's hunting, as by driving to Grimthorpe I shall be able to catch the evening train. I will be in Dieppe to-morrow morning, and you shall hear what I am about soon after."

When he has really made up his mind,

Lady Julia knows that she has no chance of turning him from his purpose, so she does not continue the discussion, but with the air of one who is ill-used, and who feels herself unjustly treated, she sweeps out of the room with her handsome head held high in the air!

We need neither follow the Colonel across country, especially as he had but a moderate day's sport, nor cross the Channel with him in the Newhaven and Dieppe steamer. But we may rejoin him the next morning when, after some difficulty, he succeeds in finding the abode of the Bushe family—a shabby stuccoed villa, which is neither actually in the town of Dieppe proper nor in the country, but which stands by itself in an untidy garden somewhat in the rear of one of the Boulevards. A rough-and-ready peasant woman—a hard-featured Norman—clad in the indigo blue which is the uniform of her class in Northern France, is cleaning pots and pans at an open window close to the front door as the Colonel walks up the overgrown weedy footpath; and as she washes

the water slops down the wall of the house and forms a puddle among the pebbles below. There is plenty of life about in the shape of cocks and hens, an old dog or two, and a huge tortoiseshell cat, who sits on the doorstep blinking at nothing, and there is evidently as much life inside the house, to judge by the babel of voices, the loud laughter, and the general want of repose that seems in the air!

The cook stops her cleaning operations as she catches sight of Colonel Damer, but does not "derange herself" till she has thoroughly made him out and ascertained the cause of his arrival. Then without haste she leaves her copper pans balanced on the window-sill, and clatters out of her kitchen to lead the way upstairs. The house seems close, ill-ventilated, and stuffy, and a mingled odour of onions and cabbages from the kitchen strikes the Colonel as being uncommonly disagreeable as he follows the *bonne* up the narrow, uncarpeted stone stairs.

The old woman flings open the door of

the room from which all the noise seems to come. . . "Un Monsieur qui demande Mademoiselle," she shouts with stentorian lungs, and Colonel Damer finds himself launched into the society of the younger members of the Bushe family.

The room, which is by no means palatial, is full of human beings; a tall, untidy-looking girl, with dishevelled hair, who is no doubt Miss Bushe *par excellence*, bends over the fire with a dirty Tauchnitz novel in her hand; another sister, evidently the Penelope of the family, in a terrible flannel dressing-gown, is making a hat, or a bonnet, and has the materials of her trade, in the shape of some mangy feathers and crumpled ribbon, spread on a table in front of her—two or three little Bushes, with headless dolls and broken toys, play and quarrel on the floor, while in the window, half buried in a huge arm-chair, is the girl that he has come so far to find.

Her sweet little face is far paler and smaller than when Colonel Damer last saw it radiant with mirth and happiness on board his yacht, but its beauty strikes him afresh.

It would seem as if he had half forgotten its loveliness.

She is thin, sadly thin, and her plain black frock makes her slim body look still more fragile and slender. She too has a book in her hand, but she is by no means immersed in it, and her expression is both sad and listless. No sooner, however, does she catch sight of Colonel Damer than her listlessness, and even her sadness, disappears as if by magic. The poor child feels that a friend has come to her at last, and for a minute or two she cannot speak by reason of her great joy. The Colonel has both her small hands in his, and they form the centre of a curious group.

Miss Bushe closes her Tauchnitz, the bonnet maker winds up business, and needle in hand draws near . . the quarrelsome children are for once united in their desire to see what is going on, and gaze up open-mouthed at Colonel Damer and Miss Fitzpatrick. As for her, poor child, the arrival of the Colonel seems to mean life and hope. The Bushe family have not been unkind to her; on the contrary, they have

petted and made much of her, but fire and water could as easily mingle as themselves and the delicate, highly strung, sensitive girl, brought up as she had been in the almost exclusive society of a man of fastidious manners and habits, who, whatever his faults and failings were, was *grand seigneur* by nature and tradition.

"My little Vega," says Colonel Damer, in tones of real affection, as soon as the girl's almost hysterical joy over his arrival is somewhat subdued, "I have come over here on purpose to see you."

"To see me? From England?" asks Vega. She can hardly believe her ears. Is it possible that any one could take so much trouble about her? Was she worthy of being thus sought?

A lovely flush dyes her cheeks—a dewy light comes into her eyes—perhaps life has some compensations after all! perhaps she will not be utterly forsaken! For a moment she looks like the Vega who found each long summer day too short for happiness nearly a year ago on board his yacht, and then she is

recalled to the realities of life by the arrival of Mrs. Bushe on the scene—Mrs. Bushe, who has hastily crowned herself with a gorgeous erection of ribbons and flowers, and has unearthed from her "jool box" some bog-oak ornaments and a large gold locket the size of a warming-pan, which is fully displayed on her ample bust! Her gown has long since seen its best days, and has not stood the wear and tear of time well; but there is no time to make a change, "and the Colonel will make allowance for French ways and habits, and wouldn't look to see me at this time of the morning in anything but *negligée!*"

"Presint the Colonel to me, Vega, me dear," says Mrs. Bushe as she sweeps up to the central figures round which her own family form a kind of fringe.

The good soul believes that she has acquired a great deal of "French polish" since she left the County Clare, and has a secret conviction that Colonel Damer will recognize in her a great lady who has rather come down in the world.

The Colonel, however, only sees before him one of the most preposterous-looking figures he has ever set eyes on, and his amazement is increased when Major Bushe appears on the scene. No foreign veneer overlays his Irish individuality. A squireen he was born, as a squireen he was moulded by nature's whimsical hand, and a squireen he will remain to the end of the chapter, though it is years since he has seen that green valley in the County Clare where his "purty little property" is situated, and it is likely to be still longer before his foot is once more on his native bog, or he puts himself within shooting distance of his handful of ill-disposed tenants.

Before Colonel Damer knows what he is about, Major Bushe and his worthy spouse have spirited him away with them, and the three find themselves in the dining-room, whose only remarkable feature seems to be the immense disproportion between the size of the large table and the dimensions of the small room.

"Now we can talk sinse, Colonel," says

Major Bushe, jauntily, as he places a sound chair for his visitor, and seats himself in an airy fashion on the table, on which a very shady table-cloth covered with the crumbs of the morning meal has been allowed to remain; "when the childer are about one can't hear oneself speak, and I can assure ye I am glad to see a friend of poor little Vega's. We must try and see what the whole of us can do to help the poor little thing. Ye're her cousin, Colonel, ar'n't you?"

"Yes," answers the Colonel, stiffly, not much relishing Major Bushe's familiarity, "and I can only say I am extremely obliged to you for all your kindness to her."

"It's nothing — nothing at all," returns Major Bushe, with a wave of his hand in the direction of his wife. "Mrs. Bushe feels like a mother to her. Why, Vega's just like one of our own, and we wish nothing better than to keep her with us always. If you're agreeable, Colonel, we *will* keep her, though I'm thinking some foine young man will be round one of these days, and

then it will be a case of good-bye to the poor Bushes."

"At the same time, we are bound, for her own sake," chimes in Mrs. Bushe, in insinuating accents, "to let you know that we are poor people. In the old days, when we kept what might be called 'open house' at Ballymassagart, the poor child would have been welcome to the run of her teeth, and we'd have quarrelled with any one who'd ever have talked of money passing between us. 'Mais nous avong changée tout cela-r!'" quotes Mrs. Bushe, in villanous French, "and it is our duty now to think of our large family and their prospects."

"I understand perfectly," says the Colonel, "and you may rest assured that if my cousin stays on with you there will be no difficulty about money. But my own plans are not yet settled, and I have not made up my mind yet what will be best for her."

Major and Mrs. Bushe exchange glances with each other.

"*No difficulty about money!*" The words sound almost incredibly delightful in their

ears, and make them more anxious than ever either for Vega's society or for the material help that will accompany it.

"If I might venture to make a suggestion," says Major Bushe, in the smoothest of tones, and his eye is positively watery as he speaks, "I would remark that Vega would be much happier here with us all than the poor choild could be anywhere else. She has known us for years; ivery one of my boys and girls are like brothers and sisters to her; Mrs. Bushe would be her second mother, and as Vega has lived always in France, and is a French girl, so to speak, she would miss all the fun and the 'sang gène' of life abroad if she went back to England. England is all very well for the rich and great, Colonel, but for the lowly and the poor, even though their ancistry may take them back to the kings of Oireland, give me the gaiety and the cheap amusements of all sorts that we can get here. Leave Vega to us, Colonel, and she will be a happy gy-url."

If Lady Julia had accompanied the

Colonel, little time, indeed, would have been lost in closing with this offer. The more, however, that Major and Mrs. Bushe urged the advantages of life at "Mong Plaisir," as they call their villa, and the great affection that they bear to Vega, the more does the plan of leaving Vega there seem a distasteful one to Colonel Damer.

"Would you ask Vega to put on her hat, and I will take her for a walk," says the Colonel, at last, to Mrs. Bushe; "I should like to have a little talk with her before settling anything. It is impossible for me to make up my mind all at once."

Half an hour later and Colonel Damer and his little cousin are walking on the edge of the close-cropped down, above the chalky cliffs that fall so sheer into the sea that rolls at their base.

It is a lovely winter day; sea and sky are both beautifully blue,and the sails of the different fishing boats—the cliffs that cut so boldly the horizon line—even the sheep that are scattered over the down, all seem dazzlingly white, while the air is clear and keen. It is

long since there has been so much spring in Vega's light foot, or so much joy in her lovely eyes. She seems suddenly to have awoke from a long sleep. The sun once more warms her; the breeze blows fair; she sees the well-known picture of steep cliffs and open sea, and it gives her joy again.

Every gull that skims the blue waters, every ship that sails up the Channel, seems to add to her happiness. She no longer walks in a day-dream, thinking either of the short but glorious past, or fretting over her present troubles. Hope has sprung to life once more. She is child enough to put her hand in Colonel Damer's, and hand in hand the two walk along the narrow path at the edge of the cliff. He is pleased that she should do this willingly and of her own accord, and the touch of that small hand confirms him in his resolution.

"She shall have her choice," he says to himself. "Life at Conholt will be no bed of roses for the poor child. Lady Julia will take care of that; but, at any rate, it

wouldn't be the same thing as life with these Bushes here. The alternative is a poor one, and, upon my word, if I were in her shoes, I don't know which I should choose. Personally, I should say *anything* to get away from Lady Julia! but then, on the other hand, this Bushe family is very terrible. For any one gifted with a thick skin there need not be a moment's hesitation. Lady Julia's words, and Lady Julia's looks, would make no impression at all on some people, for there are plenty of women as well as men who really feel that hard words break no bones; but Vega is not one of that sort. She is sensitive, and highly strung to a fault. An unkind word would hurt her like a blow. Still, *could* she endure for an indefinite time the vulgarity, noise, and confusion of this underbred family? Well! well! I am incapable of judging for her—she shall have her choice."

But the girl finds it as hard, or harder, to make a decision than even Colonel Damer.

She knows, and he does not, that Lady

Julia is her declared enemy, *et pour cause.*

She remembers every word that Lady Julia uttered, and the dark things that came to light, when Vega heard her father's story for the first time, from her envenomed lips.

Ought she to find a home under the roof of the woman who hunted her from the yacht, who disliked her from the beginning, and who was madly jealous of her at the end? On the other hand, Conholt Park—all England—seems full of Brian Beresford. Let her but once cross the blue streak, and she believes she must see him again. And then the alternative. Life with the Bushe family would no doubt have no storms, no scenes, no emotions, but flat, hideous monotony! Better, better far, the vicissitudes of life, than to rot on such a mud-bank.

"But Lady Julia," she says in a faltering voice,—"Lady Julia would not wish me to come."

"Lady Julia is very sorry for you," says

her husband stoutly; "I wish you could have heard her speaking about you the morning before I came away. She was all that was kind. You know she sometimes says more than she means, and I hope, my dear child, that you will always remember that, and stand a hard word or two as well as you can, if you elect to come to us, which I hope, most sincerely, that you will."

"Did Lady Julia really talk about me kindly?" asks Vega, eagerly; let her but assure herself that such is the case, and she will be undecided no longer.

"Of course she did, Vega," he answers, and if he strays somewhat from the narrow path of truth, surely it will be counted to him as but a venial sin; "but you must always remember, if you do come to us, that whatever happens, you will have a firm friend in me." This is perfectly the case, only, unfortunately, when husband and wife differ seriously, it is not always the best man who wins. "You can't possibly stay with these Bushes always, kind people as I suppose they are," he goes on. "I think I must

settle for you, Vega. You had better come home with me."

So the die is cast, much to the disappointment of Major and Mrs. Bushe, who had in imagination already made good use of the small but assured pittance that would come to them through Vega Fitzpatrick.

"One month more would have made no difference at all, at all," laments Mrs. Bushe, "and, with all her rich relations, they couldn't have offered us less than two hundred a year for looking after Vega for them."

"Well, Jemima, me dear, we're no worse off than we were," says Major Bushe, who is not a light-hearted Irishman from the County Clare for nothing; "and you can't say the Colonel didn't behave handsome to us. His cold, distant ways don't suit me, but all the same, I admired him, Jemima, I positively admired him when he said to you, 'I hardly dare to make so bold, Mrs. Bushe' (or something like that), 'but if you would be so kind as to buy a suitable present for each of your

family with the contents of this envelope, or lay it out in any other way that pleases yourself, I should feel much obliged.' I couldn't have done it meself with greater delicacy, me dear, and faix, we've lost Vega, but we're so much to the good at any rate.

"And you, Vega, me darlint," says Major Bushe to the girl, as they walk down together to the steamer by which Colonel Damer and Miss Fitzpatrick are to cross the Channel the same evening, "remimber that whativer happens, you have always a friend in Domenic Bushe, and a home ready and waiting for you at 'Mong Plaisir.' You've chosen luxury, and wealth, and all the honours and glories of this world, and you've turned your back on loving hearts, and a continted family, and a happy, though humble home. The divil fly away wid me, but I'd have done the same if I were in your shoes," adds the Major, relapsing into the squireen for a moment, and with a twinkle in his eyes as he thinks of the contrast he himself had conjured up. "I only mean to

tell you that if you're not happy over there, and ye find that all that glitters is not gold, ye'll remember there are always the poor Bushes to fall back on. Well, good-bye again, me dear, and joy go with you."

CHAPTER VI.

"Ave Faustina Imperatrix."

"I WISH this meeting was well over," thinks Colonel Damer to himself as he and Vega sit side by side in the luxurious brougham that is bringing them almost too quickly, to suit his present frame of mind, from the Grimthorpe Railway Station to Conholt Park. "We shall be home in no time at this rate, and I haven't yet settled what I am to say to Lady Julia. What Lady Julia will say to me is a good deal more to the point. Something disagreeable, I expect, and lucky if I get off without a regular scene. I have one or two chances in my favour. One is that she is generally so inf—rn—lly busy, has her hands full with the Primrose League, or a public meeting, or some entertainment, or getting up a ball

at Grimthorpe, in such a way as to spite all her equals and mortify all the small fry of the county, or putting people to rights, or setting others by the ears, or in a bustle of some kind, so that my misdemeanours may pass unnoticed. I won't escape altogether. Her ladyship never forgets, but the evil day may be put off, and in my present frame of mind that will be something gained. There is always a chance too of getting off in quite another way. It would be even better than finding her too busy to pitch into me. There may be some young fool about," and the Colonel smiles a grim smile, for no jealous pangs assail him, "and he may be such a devoted slave, and satisfy even her mania for admiration so thoroughly that she may be in quite an angelic mood. I have seen such a state of things before now, and have blessed the young idiot who worshipped at miladi's shrine. Well, here we are! now for it," and the brougham pulls up under the great arched porch that forms part of the beautiful façade of Conholt Park. The massive oaken doors fly open as

the carriage stops, and Vega, as if in a dream, enters the first English home she has ever known.

The entrance-hall is crossed, she has a vision of oak panels, shining armour, stags' heads and huge antlers, while the floor on which she walks is now smooth as ice, and now covered with thick rugs and heavy skins in which her feet sink. They enter a long gallery, and here lights gleam, for there is a great fireplace at the further end, and a large party is grouped about it. The tea-table is spread, some of the guests are round it, others are sitting near the cheerful blaze, while on a low couch on one side sits the great, the dreaded Lady Julia.

This couch stands on a platform which, though raised but one low step above the rest of the room, gains importance in consequence.

It seems to dominate the rest of the surroundings; and when Lady Julia, who has for long affected one particular corner of it, sits there, it seems a regal chair, well suited for such a queenly form.

The grand outlines of her magnificent figure become more remarkable, and her dress takes the folds of royal robes as it falls on the step and sweeps hence to the ground. The tawny hues and the yellow gleams in that splendid garment that she wears to-night recall the colouring of tiger or leopard skin. It is imagined to be a tea-gown, but, if so, it is a glorified one, for both in the skilful blending of the rich warm brown and gold, and in the inimitable grace of its every line, the hand of an artist may be seen.

The long loose drapery that does duty for sleeves falls from the arms which it does not attempt to hide—the beautiful bare arms in which Lady Julia takes inordinate pride, and which indeed are rarely white and rarely shaped.

A young man—and a remarkably handsome one to boot—sits on the low step close to her. She likes her lovers to sit thus at her feet.

Everything is going well with her, and the

> "Cold eyelids that hide like a jewel
> Hard eyes that grow soft for an hour"

give her face almost a soft expression, while

"The cruel
Red mouth, like a venomous flower,"

smiles down brightly on her slave.

"Here we are, my dear Julia," says the Colonel, advancing like a courtier to her throne, and rejoicing greatly in his sovereign's gracious looks, even though those looks are not meant for him. "We have had a desperately long journey, and a very tiresome day to-day. These cross-country lines are terrible. Here is little Vega, you see."

The slim girl, in her sombre weeds, forms a contrast not only to Lady Julia, but to the rest of that brilliant-looking band; and Lady Julia, radiant as she is at the present moment, feels that any idea of rivalry between herself and that slip of a girl is pure foolishness.

Struck with this thought, she not only receives her husband with sufficient cordiality, but half rises from her couch to greet Vega Fitzpatrick.

She bends down to her, and a chilly kiss is her reward for looking so pale, worn out, and travel-stained.

"I suppose you are very tired, Vega," says the great lady. "Please some one give Miss Fitzpatrick tea and something to eat. I am so thoroughly worn out myself I am not capable of further exertion. We've had a splendid day to-day, Reginald. A pity you missed it—never had such sport."

As a matter of fact the sport had been rather moderate, but Lady Julia, like most hunting women, considers the chase from a purely personal point of view. She had undoubtedly gone noticeably well herself in two fair gallops; had cut down the other hard-riding ladies who were out; had gone out of her way to take some regular "gallery" jumps; had followed Gray Diddleton, the hardest rider in Blankshire, over a break-neck place, and had lived to tell the tale.

No wonder she is satisfied with herself, and even triumphant.

"Pussie, my dear, are you taking care of

Miss Fitzpatrick?" calls out her ladyship, in gracious tones.

"Yes, Bijou," obediently answers a pale little girl, who, clad in useful brown serge, is sitting behind the tea-urn. She might call Lady Julia "aunt," if she only dared, for she is her sister's child.

Lady Julia, however, will not face the idea of a grown-up niece, and "Ju," as she long ago decreed that Pussie and her sister Dottie should call her, has been corrupted into "Bijou," with her full consent.

"Then I think the sooner Miss Fitzpatrick is allowed to go upstairs the better pleased she will be," says Lady Julia. "My dear Pussie, I am not equal to showing the way. *You* have been doing nothing all day long, so I don't mind asking you to take Miss Fitzpatrick up to her room, and be sure and see she has everything she wants."

"This is too good to last," thinks Colonel Damer, as he opens the door for the two girls, and repeats in still kinder words his wife's injunctions to Pussie Langton.

"You want to know who she is?" he

hears Lady Julia now saying to the Chastelard who is sitting at her feet. "Oh, she's a far-away cousin of the Colonel's, a waif and stray with some Vivian blood in her veins. She is an orphan, and he has taken it into his head to bring her over here—I suppose I shall have to be kind to her, but I am no good at looking after girls, they bore me too much. However, I suppose she won't be here long. Pussie and Dottie are always coming over, and I know that my sister Hermione doesn't care for them to associate with girls that she knows nothing about." And here Lady Julia laughs. "Hermione has grown so very particular now-a-days, and this girl has been knocking about abroad all her life, and we really know very little about her."

"What a perfect angel you are! You are kind and good to every one," says Chastelard admiringly. "I am sure, all the same, it must be an awful nuisance to you to have a girl always about—but you are simply wonderful."

"After that I may depart with a mind at

peace!" thinks the Colonel to himself; "I shall have no scolding from her ladyship to-night!"

In the meantime the two girls have crossed the round hall, and have mounted the principal staircase of the house, whose panelled walls, hung with the pictures of many a dead-and-gone Damer, and low broad oaken steps, covered with carpets so thick and velvety that no step that treads on them can be heard, form a contrast to the next flight of stairs up which they climb. These steep stone stairs, with their plain whitewashed walls, evidently lead, if not to the servants' quarters, at any rate to an inferior part of the house; but after they are ascended there is yet another short flight which winds corkscrew-fashion before they reach the bare and scantily-furnished room at the top of the turret which is destined for Miss Fitzpatrick. It is not an uncomfortable room, but neither is it a room chosen for an honoured guest. It is but meanly garnished, and seems to offer no hospitable welcome to the new-comer. The fire has

just been lighted, the sticks splutter damply, and the smoke seems disinclined to go up the chimney. To those who go delicately all their days, and to whom comfort and luxury are as second nature, these poor quarters, and the evident want of either attention or preparation, would seem a kind of insult, while the sensitive and timid would feel hurt by the coldness of the welcome that is indicated.

Everything is relative, however, and as Vega has never known either comfort or luxury, and as she has never been welcomed anywhere, she does not miss what has never been hers. After all, this room is no barer than was her room in the only house that she ever called home, and if the noisy welcome that the Bushes had given her to "Mong Plaisir" had distracted her attention just at first from the dirt and dilapidation of that shabby abode, they had been thrust on her notice very soon afterwards.

Miss Langton does not take much trouble to do the honours to the new arrival. She

looks round the room in an apathetic kind of way.

"Aunt Julia said I was to be sure and see you had everything you wanted."

She repeats her aunt's words in parrot-like fashion, and, as if to follow out her instructions to the letter, she peeps first into the soap-dish and then into an ink-stained blotting-book; she seems relieved to find that neither soap, nor two sheets of writing-paper, and the blackened stump of a pen, are wanting, and then she sinks supinely into an old-fashioned arm-chair that guards the inhospitable hearth.

The two girls have hardly spoken at all, and have certainly made no noise; but as the vultures of the desert are said to appear on the scene, no one knows from whence, whenever there is anything to be picked up, or even to be investigated, so the youngest Miss Langton seems to have got wind of their arrival, and drops uninvited into Vega's room to see what is going on.

She is by no means a counterpart of her

sister Pussie, although she is hardly more prepossessing; but the dulness and apathy that distinguishes the one are replaced in the other by a sulky, defiant, and somewhat ill-tempered expression. Both are short, but Pussie is small, flat, and meagre, while Nature's original intention seems to have been to have made a fine woman of Miss Dottie. She has broad shoulders and fine arms, and is built on rather a large scale; but her legs have not grown with her growth, and she has remained squat, and too broad for her height. Her head, though not small, is well-shaped; and the dark hair, fine eyes, and beetle brows of her mother's family have been inherited by her, but in her case have lost all their effect by reason of the lowliness of her stature and the stumpiness of her figure. Her eyes can flash fire and fury on occasion, and her straight black brows give her a good deal of Lady Julia's expression; but whereas the latter, to do her justice, even in her worst moods, looks like an indignant, or an insulted empress, her niece never rises to such a height, for

she is cast in a coarser and more Jewish-looking mould.

All the same, Lady Julia shudders when she traces the likeness between herself and her niece, and if she feels a passive sort of dislike to Pussie, she has an active aversion to Dottie, which displays itself by doing her best to keep her out of sight, and out of the way.

With all her faults, a certain amount of strength of mind and body must be conceded to Dottie, of which her elder sister is not possessed, and she neither looks indifferent nor stupid as she enters Vega's room and takes stock of her possessions.

"Far too good-looking to suit Aunt Julia," she thinks to herself, as she stares at Vega, and looks her over from head to foot; "she won't stay long here, that's certain, and she will spend most of her time in the school-room with us, while she remains;" but she welcomes the new-comer not unkindly, and at least makes a slight effort, with the aid of the poker and a chink of open window, to help the smoke up the chimney.

"What is going to happen to her?" she asks her sister, ignoring Vega as if she was not present. "Is she to dine downstairs to-night, or to tea with us in the schoolroom?"

"She is to tea with us in the schoolroom," answers Pussie, indifferently, and with the air of one who is in utter subjection to the powers that be, of whom indeed she is the mouthpiece.

"Well, does Jane know?" demands Dottie; "I suppose that at least they will give us another egg, and an extra roll or two." They do not seem to mind the presence of a stranger, but discuss the commissariat together in the most unrestrained manner. "I suppose tea will be ready in half an hour," says Pussie, and she gets up, and without more ado walks out of Miss Fitzpatrick's bedroom. Dottie pauses to give Vega the route, for the schoolroom is a long way off. Vega, however, is quick, and Dottie's explanations are lucid, so it is not much more than half an hour before she finds herself in the schoolroom, a shabbily-furnished but not uncomfortable room, in which a large fire burns

behind the strong bars of a high nursery fender. Everything is old in the room, but, in spite of old carpet, old bookcases filled with old books, old chairs, and a disreputable old sofa, which is draped in the oldest and dirtiest of chintz, it has a certain air of old-fashioned snugness. In fact, whole generations of young Damers have lived and learned lessons in it, and everything seems to bear a homely but rather venerable stamp in consequence.

The two Misses Langton have not thought it necessary to wait for their guest, but are hard at work at tea. Pussie, who fills the post of honour behind an old copper tea-urn, is reading a tattered novel, which she has propped up with the sugar-basin, and she turns over a page, and takes a large mouthful of bread-and-butter, turn and turn about. Dottie is very busy with buttered toast, the fruits of her own industry, and the result of many journeys to and from the blazing fire.

"What will you eat, Miss Fitzpatrick?" inquires Dottie, shoving a boiled egg in her direction. Pussie, with her eyes still fixed on

her book, dribbles out some tea with neither care nor attention, and pushes it over to Vega. The two girls have been so entirely kept in the background, and so much neglected, that their manners would hardly pass muster in the servants' hall. Lady Julia is actually glad that such is the case, as it gives her an excuse, and a good one, not to bring them forward, or to let them mingle in the company of herself and her fellows. Their ways strike Vega Fitzpatrick as very singular.

"I suppose you would much rather be dining downstairs," says Dottie, who has inherited the vice—or virtue—of almost brutal frankness; "but you see there are eighteen people at dinner to-night, and Aunt Julia very seldom lets us dine unless they are quite alone. I can't say I think it a great treat then: Aunt Julia is always cross, Uncle Regie never opens his mouth, and as for Mums, she finds fault with everything we say or do, and Aunt Julia joins in. But of course I like the food, and the ice-pudding, and all that. It's very different from our

teas up here ; we sometimes really don't get enough to eat, for no one has time to look after us, and everybody thinks us a nuisance. I don't believe, though, you'll ever dine downstairs at all. You are far too pretty to suit Aunt Julia."

"Dottie, what nonsense you do talk!" says Pussie, as she awakens to the realities of life and her sister's unfeeling plain speaking ; she has come to the end of the second volume of a cheap translation of one of Gaboriau's novels, and looks up at the speaker with dazed eyes. "You ought not to say such things before strangers."

"Miss Fitzpatrick will find it all out fast enough for herself," says Dottie, defiantly. "Besides, she won't be a stranger long if she joins our mess, as Uncle Regie calls it, up here. You like Uncle Regie, don't you? He is the only person in the house who is ever kind to us, or who ever says a nice word to us."

"Like him! Like Colonel Damer!" answers Vega, eagerly, and her lovely face lights up with gratitude and affection ; "I

should rather think I did! Oh! what could I ever have done without him? He has always been so very, very good to me."

"You're right," says Dottie, with a pleasanter expression on her sulky face than it has yet worn; "there's no doubt at all about his kindness. The only pity is that we never see him at all; he is always hunting, or shooting, or driving into Grimthorpe to attend some meeting, or to do some business, or people come over here to talk to him, or he is writing letters, or playing billiards, or something or other. We sometimes don't set eyes on him for days at a time. But it can't be helped, I suppose; and on Sunday afternoons he insists that we should go out with them all, and then he generally walks behind with us; he takes us to the stables or the farm, or we do something amusing. He always brings us presents from London when he goes up, as he sometimes does for the night, and we get a sovereign from him on birthdays and on Christmas day, and he never forgets us,

which is saying a good deal in this house."

"Do you always live here?" asks Vega; "and why are you obliged to stay in the schoolroom when there is no governess?"

"One question at a time, please," says Dottie, quite delighted to have an audience to whom to air her grievances; "no, we don't always live here; we have a house in London, but you see we are very, very hard-up, and it is the aim and object of Mums' life to let it, and then when she has found some one who will take it, she likes really to save, and to live on her relations. But not many of our relations will let us live on them; they won't keep us for more than ten days or so at the outside, and, as Mums says that there is nothing so expensive as moving about, she gets Aunt Julia to let us stay on here for the two or three months that the house is off our hands. I suppose Aunt Julia must really be rather fond of Mums, for we are here like this nearly every winter. They are always fighting, but I expect they really suit each

other; and then Uncle Regie is so rich, and Conholt is such a big house, that it doesn't matter to her. Aunt Julia wouldn't stand it for a day if she had to take Pussie and I about, or even if we were much downstairs. She hates girls—she always says so, but so long as we are kept up here, she doesn't bother her head about us. She and the Mums are both delighted to get rid of us. Now for your other question. No, we have got no governess. We haven't had one for years; but this has always been called the schoolroom, and the schoolroom it will remain, I expect, to the end of the chapter. It suits Aunt Julia to be able to tell people that her 'little nieces' are up in the schoolroom. It makes them think that we are much younger than we are. Oh! there goes the gong! They will be going in to dinner in a minute now. Come on! come on!"

Acting on her own words, Dottie jumps up, and with her mouth still full of buttered toast, she tears out of the room; Pussie follows her in equal haste, but in a more dig-

nified manner, and Vega, caught as it were in the tide, seems to have no option but to run also.

They clatter downstairs, and find themselves standing in the gallery that runs round the hall, from which they have a capital view of the procession of smartly-dressed people as they file in to dinner.

Dottie bends right over the oaken railing, devouring them with her black eyes; Pussie, more discreetly, keeps a little in the background; while Vega's golden head against the dark panels makes a lovely picture for no eye to see.

"Look at them all!" whispers Dottie. "Here comes Uncle Regie first of all, looking so handsome in his red coat; he always has that grand bored look when he takes some fat important old dowager in to dinner; he seems as if he hadn't a word to say for himself, but he makes up for it by looking nice! I don't know who the next man is with Lady Winton; that's Lady Winton, that very tall, fair, handsome woman in mauve. She doesn't look like a grandmother, does she?

She is one, all the same, but nobody seems to look like a grandmother now-a-days. Perhaps a great-grandmother may, but I don't know any. Now here come all the nice young men; the nice ones always go near the end. Don't they look handsome, and all exactly alike as one looks down on them? There's my mother in plain black silk. She says she lives in it because she's so very, *very* poor, but we know better. She wears it because she looks handsomer in it than anything else, better even than Bijou in all her finery. The Mums is going in with Mr. Vansittart. He's Aunt Julia's fancy man, you know; but he is a nobody—I mean he has no rank at all of any kind, so, as she can't take him in herself, Aunt Julia gives him to Mums, and woe betide her if she doesn't put him next Aunt Julia! He *is* good-looking, isn't he, Miss Fitzpatrick? but he's not my style at all; the sort of looks I like are quite different to his. I like curly fair men with blue eyes, like Brian Beresford. Have you ever seen Brian Beresford, Miss Fitzpatrick?"

Vega gives a little gasp. Has she not already sought for his face in that procession —vainly sought for it—and is not her heart heavy as lead in consequence?

As the different men file across the hall, fair or dark, tall or short, she eagerly gazes down on each of them in succession, but her eyes are not gladdened by the sight of the man who has filled her thoughts, waking or sleeping, for the last six months. To hear his name spoken gives her a kind of shock, for it seems strange to her that he should be spoken about at all.

"Did you ever meet him?" and Dottie Langton repeats her question, fixing, at the same time, her bold, black eyes full on Vega.

She has heard her sigh, and she is one of those whom nothing escapes. But she can gather no information from Vega's manner. The girl is white indeed, but hardly paler than she was before, and she has been forced to rely on herself alone all her life, so her present questioner does not take her aback.

"Yes," she answers, steadily, and even Dottie's sharp ears catch no tremor in her voice; "he was on board the yacht when I was there last autumn. Is he staying here now?"

"Staying here now?" and Dottie laughs as if the bare idea was an exquisite joke. "Why, my dear, he is at the other end of the world at this moment. He started last autumn for America, and Japan, and I don't know where else. Uncle Regie calls him a regular globe-trotter; oh, dear! how I wish he wasn't so far away," sighs Dottie, and she does not notice that Vega sighs also. "He *is* nice, if you like! He's one of the people who thinks we're human beings, and who tries as much as he can to give us a little pleasure. He has been up to the schoolroom often and often, and never comes here without bringing us chocolates, or bon-bons, or something to amuse us. No wonder Aunt Julia is so much in love with Brian Beresford! I'm in love with him also, and so would Pussie be, if she could be in love with any one."

"I think," says Pussie, primly, "it would be just as well if we went upstairs again. There's nothing more to be seen now, and it can't be very amusing to Miss Fitzpatrick to hear you talking nonsense!"

CHAPTER VII.

"The weary day rins doon, and dees,
The weary night wears through,
And never an hour is fair wi' flower,
And never a flower wi' dew."

It is not unhappiness so much as utter stagnation that make these first days and weeks at Conholt Park seem almost unbearable to Vega Fitzpatrick. She knows now for the first time what it is to taste "the weariness of life!" The child has had a sad time of it so far; little love or affection has fallen to her lot, and little joy has brightened her existence. It would almost seem as if any change must be for the better, and that she at least would have no past to regret.

Her father's society had given her no comfort, his affection had been meted out to her in a grudging, indifferent kind of way; his

death had caused her horror rather than grief, and in the poor pinched life they had led, there had been no mirth or happiness, or even comfort. There had been few illusions possible about the out-at-elbows, all but squalid home to which the Bushe family had welcomed her with noisy hospitality, though it was not their fault that the boys and girls, not to mention their parents, were made of coarser clay than their guest, and that there could be no sympathy or real friendship between them.

But for all that, the dire monotony of the life at Conholt is more crushing still to her spirit. There had been freedom, at any rate, in the life that had gone before. She could breathe the air of heaven, could wander in the leafy woods of Tibermont, and the great forest of Arques, could brave the sea-breezes on the edge of the chalky cliffs without let or hindrance. People came and went in the picturesque streets of the old Norman town ; music was played on the Casino Terrace ; there were the churches of St. Jacques and St. Remi to pray in. Here

no freedom is allowed her; prohibitions hedge her and her two companions in on every side; forbidden fruit seems to hang on every bough. She sometimes wonders bitterly why they are permitted to be alive at all!

They may not wander alone among the woods; they may not walk on the terraces and in the gardens reserved for the owners of Conholt and their guests; they may not join the merry parties who drive and ride and live a life of amusement and pleasure; and they receive but a grudging and niggardly welcome when they appear in any of the public rooms downstairs. The schoolroom is their kingdom, and to the schoolroom they are practically banished.

Vega has hitherto lived only with men and women, and is utterly unaccustomed to the ways of other girls. She finds Pussie Langton uninteresting and wearisome in the extreme; and as for Dottie—her cynical sharpness, her bitterness, and the vulgarity of her manners annoy her terribly.

The two sisters spar, snarl, and quarrel from morning to night. They agree on no possible subject, except when they make common cause to repine over the dulness of their lives, and to talk bitterly about the eagerness of their mother to suppress her daughters, and about the intense selfishness of their aunt.

But they are no companions to the refined, charming girl who finds herself entirely thrown on them for society. They are so much engrossed also with their own concerns that they are utterly indifferent to hers; and Dottie, though the feeling, as yet, smoulders in her breast, has it in her to be madly jealous of Vega Fitzpatrick.

She is quick enough to see that were they ever matched against each other, she and Pussie might renounce at once and for ever all idea of rivalry to Vega; that in her society nobody would ever look at them a second time; and that, beside the tall, slim girl, she looks more stumpy, and her sister more flat and meagre than ever; while Vega's lovely

face puts her own completely in the shade, in spite of black flashing eyes and beetle brows.

It is not Colonel Damer's fault that Vega runs a very good chance of being forgotten altogether; but he is never at home at all. To be sure, he generally sleeps under his own roof-tree; but the season is drawing to its end, and he hunts every day of the week; or if by chance he misses a day, he is simply overwhelmed with business, and has no time to think about the girl he has so stoutly determined to befriend.

He forgets her, and Lady Julia ignores her; not so Lady Hermione! She has looked at her, talked to her, stared at her; and she knows that she cannot afford to be ignored. She knows that Vega Fitzpatrick has only to be seen, and that all men will go mad about her!

She is the last person in the world to undervalue the power of supreme good looks, for she has not been an acknowledged beauty ever since she was a dark-eyed girl in her father's house for nothing.

She knows that, in the best of her *beaux jours*, she was never lovely as Vega is lovely; and that now, let that "bright, particular star" but once appear on the horizon, and not only would those farthing rushlights, her own daughters, be utterly eclipsed, but her own handsome face and still graceful figure would be completely put in the shade; while, as for her sister, though men would still worship at her shrine, even her magnificent beauty would pale before the angel-face of the young girl.

"I can't imagine what you were thinking of, Julia," says Lady Hermione Langton to her sister, about ten days after Vega's arrival at Conholt Park, "when you so weakly gave in to Reginald about that Fitzpatrick girl. It's not like you" (she is right there!), "and I don't understand what you meant by it. In the first place, What have you got to do with her at all? She's nothing to you—or to Reginald either, for that matter; for, if people began to think it necessary to adopt all their hundredth cousins, I don't know

where it would end. There would have to be community of goods in the long run, and communistic principles, and free love, and all the rest of it! Of course, it resolves itself into the old story—a man's admiration for a pretty face! If Vega Fitzpatrick had been a plain girl, do you think for a moment that Reginald would have torn over to Dieppe to look after her? Do you think that she would have been sitting at Conholt Park at this moment? But, mind you, Julia, I give you this word of warning: hers is no ordinary beauty; she has not merely a pretty face—I don't believe you could find a much lovelier one anywhere. You ought to look matters steadily in the face. A stray girl is always a horrible bore. It is bad enough to have children of one's own: they are a never-ending worry and bother and disappointment. But willingly to put one's head in a noose—to adopt a girl who has the additional drawback of such good looks that every man who sets eyes on her will fall in love with her—is quite beyond me."

"How you run on, Hermione!" says Lady

Julia, fretfully. "Who ever talked about adoption? That's quite a word and an idea of your own. I have no more idea of adopting Vega Fitzpatrick than I have of adopting Pussie or Dottie; and that's saying a good deal."

The two sisters are sitting in Lady Julia's boudoir—a wonderful room, whose amber panels and tawny draperies are well fitted to set off the handsome brunette beauty of its owner. Conholt is nearly deserted this morning, for Colonel Damer and most of the guests have gone out hunting; but the meet is a long way off, and Lady Julia is lazy, so she stays at home, and lets Lady Hermione give her advice.

"Oh, you may laugh as much as you like," says the latter; "but you will be the last person in the world to laugh when she has set the whole house by the ears, and perhaps interfered with some flirtation of your own. Believe me, her arrival here has been a great mistake. It is worse than a crime; it's a blunder——!"

"You let your imagination run away with

you, Hermione, and your tongue too," interrupts Lady Julia. "I thought Reginald was a fool for bringing her over here to us, and I told him so. We don't want stray girls to take root for an indefinite time; but, all the same, you may keep your mind at ease: she won't be here long. She will stay with us for a few weeks, I expect, and then she must return whence she came. Even Reginald himself couldn't expect me to take out a girl who hasn't the faintest claim on me, and who, into the bargain, I positively dislike."

"No, Julia; I can't imagine you looking after any girl. You are not the stuff of which chaperones are made."

Lady Julia reads between the lines, and draws the exact inference that her sister intends to convey. She knows that she is selfish, but she does not like Lady Hermione to hint it so very plainly.

"Well, I may return the compliment, Hermione," she says angrily, "and go still further! You're not quite the stuff of which model mothers are made. I don't think

Pussie and Dottie have had a particularly good time of it so far. How you used to knock them about when they were small! You cowed Pussie thoroughly; she always was a poor thing! a regular Langton, and she's no good at all now. As for Dottie, she's as sulky as a bear, and so ill-conditioned and violent tempered; but I expect *she* wouldn't have been quite so bad if you had treated her more kindly. There was a time when you rather took her up, when she was quite a little thing, and her face seemed nothing but black eyes and straight eyebrows. She really looked as if she might turn out something like *us!* She was too short and too fat even then, but that was rather a point in her favour than otherwise, for you could delude people into thinking she was two or three years younger than she was! In those days you dressed her smartly, and curled her black hair, and took her about with you everywhere. People used to call her the best chaperone in London! But that phase didn't last long; she got too old for that sort of thing, and

lost the certain amount of good looks that she possessed as a child. She got stumpy and coarse-looking, and since then you have not troubled yourself much about either her or poor Pussie."

"You are plain-spoken, Julia, as you always are!" says Lady Hermione, bitterly; "but I don't see in what way abuse of Pussie and Dottie has to do with the question in point. They are not in your way, poor things! and never will be, whereas this Miss Vega is a very different thing."

"Long before she has a chance of being in my way she will have departed from here, you may rest assured of that. She is no favourite of mine! We took her with us when we went that cruise in the *Gitana* last autumn that I told you about, but I neither cared for her nor her ways. She struck me as being rather bold and forward, and Cissy Grahame entirely agreed with me."

Lady Hermione feels she has sufficiently annoyed her sister and hostess, so refrains

from giving vent to the thought that is uppermost in her mind, which is that she cannot imagine Cissy Grahame disagreeing on any mortal subject with the powers that be. She knows that that far-seeing little lady realizes thoroughly that she owes her success in life to being able to turn her coat at a moment's notice to suit the views of any one in authority, and also to the prudence with which she bridles her tongue.

"No! I suppose Cissy Grahame didn't particularly care for Miss Fitzpatrick," answers Lady Hermione; "she never said so in as many words, and it is very hard to find out anything about Cissy's likes or dislikes; but even Cissy now and then shows her feeling by her manner, and I saw plainly enough that Miss Fitzpatrick was no favourite of hers. I expect she cut her out in some way, for I suppose there were some men or other on board. Oh! by the way, didn't you have Brian Beresford with you?"

The Japanese fan in Lady Julia's hand

shakes ever so slightly, but the tremor is not lost on her sister, and there is just a perceptible pause before Lady Julia answers in an off-hand manner, "Brian Beresford! Oh! yes, he was there; he was with us nearly the whole autumn."

"And Miss Vega?" asks Lady Hermione. "Did she try to take her away from ——? Did he admire her very much? I never saw a man yet who didn't like change, and I expect Brian isn't more constant than his neighbours! I suppose he fell in love with her?"

Lady Julia makes no answer; she leaves her luxurious corner by the fire with the air of one who is very much bored, and walks across the room to one of the long windows that look out on the park. She stands there apparently idly looking out, but she forgets that a mirror that hangs on one side enables her sister to see an angry flash in her dark eyes, and a heightened colour in her cheek.

Thus she stands, looking out on the leafless trees, the pinched shrubs, and the grey

grass. The country is looking its very worst, and the cold, hard light of a March sun dispels any illusion of beauty that might be imagined to belong to the scene; the brown, bare branches look like withered sticks; the evergreens belie their name, and have the appearance of foliage cut out of metal, and there is not even a touch of tender green on the turf of the park. In more genial seasons, and under a less fierce light, there is something that pleases the eye in the wide extent of park, flat though it be; but to-day it looks only a barren, uninteresting waste.

Lady Julia shivers as she looks out; the beauty of any country scene would always be thrown away on her if devoid of human interest in the form of the male element; still, she continues standing there, for her sister's words rankle in her mind, and she does not wish to face her till she is once more herself. At last the monotony of the landscape is broken by three figures, and Lady Julia is glad of it, for they divert her attention, and give her something to look at, criticize, and

condemn. It is Vega Fitzpatrick and the two Langtons who are crossing the park in the direction of the house. Vega is the centre figure, and Pussie and Dottie are talking across her, apparently in no friendly spirit. The sisters are dressed exactly alike, in a uniform of Lady Hermione's own contriving, which it would certainly take greater good looks than her daughters possess to stand successfully. Their plain grey duffle frocks are short, which is a mistake, as both boots and feet are not much to boast of, and jackets and hats are of the same unbecoming dingy drab as the rest of their attire.

Pussie looks poor, and thin, and *mesquine*, and seems chilly, in spite of the pace at which they are getting over the ground; while Dottie has a cut-short and stumpy appearance, and has, moreover, a bad carriage.

No wonder Vega shines in such company! Her clothes are plain enough also, and the sombre black is unrelieved by the faintest touch of white. It must be owned, however, that not only does she wear them "with a

difference," but that a French hand, though but a provincial one, has hung those folds, and followed with the eye of an unconscious artist every line of the slender, lovely figure.

Her step is elastic, she is full of life and youth, and the harsh east wind has no power to blight or wither her. It only brings some colour into her small face, and a brighter light to her eye. The joy of living is strong in her, in spite of all her troubles, and is quenched neither by the bitter blast, by the death of all that is beautiful in nature, nor by the depressing or irritating society of her two companions. She swings along, taller by a head at least than either of them, and looking like a being of another race.

The sisters talk, and wrangle, and quarrel, but she takes no part in their dissensions ; it is to her as if they were silent, for she hears nothing of their words, sees nothing of her dull surroundings, knows nothing for the moment, except that she once upon a time was happy—once had sailed over enchanted seas in the good yacht *Gitana*—once had

loved, and oh! had she been loved again—by Brian Beresford?

The remembrance of her good days brings a tender light into her eyes, and a shadowy beauty flits across her face. Vega is now near enough the window at which Lady Julia stands for her keen eye to note everything. She is a woman who is brutally frank, even to herself, and she does not attempt to undervalue the wonderful attraction that this girl possesses.

She may hate her for it, but she is not petty or foolish enough to deny or ignore it.

She wheels round as soon as Vega passes out of sight.

"You are right, Hermione—right, for once," she says. "The Colonel had no business to bring that girl over here at all. It isn't likely that I am going to trouble myself about her, and he ought to have known that for himself. If I were some years older, and were plagued with grown-up daughters of my own" (Lady Hermione feels the stab, but does not wince), "it might be another thing altogether; but as matters now stand,

it would be too ridiculous to expect me to take up a strange girl that I know nothing about—a girl who hasn't the faintest claim on us, and who comes of a very queer stock too; the daughter of a broken-down gambler, who was hunted out of society—outlawed from England, for all I know. It isn't likely *I* should be mixed up with such people! I shall speak to Reginald very plainly on the subject, and tell him she can't take root here."

Lady Hermione rejoices exceedingly. She has gained her point. If her sister could ever be persuaded to do a good turn to any one, there would be more chance of her benefits falling to the lot of Pussie and Dottie if Vega were safely out of the way, and not on the spot for Colonel Damer to urge her claims. She has also another reason for wishing Vega's speedy departure. There is always a possibility that the stream of money and its equivalents, which flows steadily, if sluggishly, in her direction from the Damer coffers, might be diverted from what she has grown to consider its legiti-

mate course, in the direction of the friendless girl.

Lady Hermione is poor, needy, and grasping. There are many comforts and luxuries which she feels she *must* have, and which the pittance she possesses does not permit her to attain to. Luckily for her schemes and requirements, the Damers are very rich. Colonel Damer is generous and kind-hearted to a fault, and if her best friend cannot credit Lady Julia with those virtues, she has at least a clannish sort of feeling towards her own family, which disposes her to grudge things less to them than to the rest of the world.

Fortunately for Lady Hermione, in spite of many rubs and jars, there has always been a sort of sympathy between herself and her sister. They have had many feelings in common and many hatreds.

Lady Hermione had stood by Lady Julia once or twice when her sister's fair name had been lightly spoken of, and she had helped her out of two or three scrapes and

an escapade or two, all of which it was absolutely necessary that Mrs. Grundy should know nothing about.

Not the least of her merits in Lady Julia's eyes now, is the fact that, while Lady Hermione is tall, handsome, dark-eyed, and splendid-looking, like herself, her seniority by three or four years, and the constant worry that a life of poverty entails on its victims, have told on her looks.

She is worn, and just a little haggard, and Lady Julia, in the pride of her full-blown beauty, is constantly reminded of her own superiority.

All these considerations tell in favour of Lady Hermione, who, on her side, means to defend her position, and keep what she has attained to.

She does not think it wise to continue any further the discussion about Vega; Lady Julia has practically given in to her, but would not be likely to stand more advice on the subject; so the conversation takes a pleasanter turn, the spoilt beauty recovering her serenity as her sister talks

to her about the devotion of her latest victim —Bertie Vansittart—and her assurance that when Brian Beresford returns once more to his native land, Lady Julia will not find it hard to whistle back the wanderer.

CHAPTER VIII.

A MANLY step on the uncarpeted corridor that leads to the schoolroom, and a friendly knock on the strong panel of the door.

The occupants looked up surprised and curious, for visitors are few and far between, and a man's step and the jingle of a spur are seldom heard in that out-of-the way part of the house.

Pussie Langton is sitting as close to the fire as the strongly-barred nursery fender will permit, stitching, or rather cobbling, in a spiritless sort of way at some of her old clothes. Her apathetic little face bends over her work, and her yawns have alone broken the silence of the room for the last ten minutes. Vega has neither looked up nor responded; she is mounted on the arm of the high old-fashioned sofa, for the gas-

burner is placed awkwardly high, and the print of the Shelley that she holds in her hand is unpleasantly small; but she sits on her perch, and neither flaring gas nor small print have power to annoy her. She has followed the poet to his own world, and he has caught her up to the seventh heaven.

The footsteps outside and the knock at the door make her look up; but her eyes are dazed and full of poetry, and it is Pussie who is on the alert, and who says, "Come in!" as the knock is repeated for the second time.

And in comes Colonel Damer. Colonel Damer is in his red coat and muddy boots, looking gay, good-natured, and jovial, as it is natural for a man to look who has had a long, happy day in the open air, whose approving conscience tells him that, without vanity, he may lay claim to having gone brilliantly over a big country, and who now has the kindly thought of coming up here to look after a little girl, of whom he is very fond, but whom he never sees by any chance. He is sure of his welcome here at any rate, and

looks beaming as he enters the door. Vega and Pussie are both taken aback for a moment, for a visitor to their quarters is rare indeed; but it is Shelley who suffers most, for the book is tossed on one side, and indeed breaks its back in the violence of its fall to the floor, while Vega, springing from her lofty position, dashes across the room, and half flings herself into Colonel Damer's arms. She is so delighted—so overjoyed to see him, and the golden head is on his shoulder, and the sweet lips are kissing the sleeve of his scarlet coat while he still stands at the door. Her delight pleases him beyond measure, and he makes much of her, pets her, and stroking her pretty hair as if she really were the child of his own that he had always longed for.

Side by side they sit on the sofa, with his arm round her shoulder, and both her hands holding his strong brown one, as if she were afraid he would escape her. She feels as if she could not be grateful enough to him for coming to see her, and her lovely dewy eyes express what she means far better than

any words. Her affection seems to warm his heart. He is so little accustomed to be made much of, and he suffers so much at the hands of his wife, that he welcomes the blessed change. Pussie has come over formally to shake hands with him. She is pleased also to see her uncle, but she has not the power of showing it, and she soon retires into her shell again and cobbles on, though she pays less attention than ever to the business on hand.

"Well, my darling, you seem blooming," says the Colonel, looking at her with attention and interest. He scans her small face with a critical eye, and is pleased to note that it is not quite so white and thin, and that her whole expression is less sad than when he found her at Dieppe.

"Conholt seems to agree with you, my child, I am happy to see, though you don't look exactly robust yet. You must go on improving, and then I shall be quite pleased. Are you tolerably happy here? I hope Pussie and Dottie are very good to you."

"Indeed they are, Colonel Damer,"

answers Vega heartily. Were they exactly the contrary, she would not find it in her heart to annoy Colonel Damer by saying so, nor would she like to give him the slightest hint of the many dull hours and the poor time in general they have in that room. She knows how much the Colonel has to stand from Lady Julia, and she would not have the heart to add to his burden. "We are all right up here," she goes on, "a little dull sometimes, and tired of our own company, but if you would only come and see us now and then we would be all right. I know how busy you always are, but do try and fit us in now and then. It makes such a difference to us when some one nice comes up here to us."

"All right, Vega," says the Colonel, "you shall be fitted in somehow. Of course, you understand why Lady Julia thinks it best that you should be kept rather in the background just now. She thinks, as you are in such deep mourning, and as Pussie and Dottie, although they are as old as you are, are not out yet, that you had better, all three

of you, be up here together, and then you can amuse each other. But I expect you bore each other now and then, and that her Ladyship is wrong in overdoing the thing quite so much. Perhaps it's just as well for you not to appear just yet, when there are a lot of people in the house; but surely, when there are only two or three, as there so often are, it might be done. Hullo! Dottie, you little wretch! what are you up to now?" Dottie has now arrived upon the scene, and her black eyes are full of surprise, mingled with admiration, as she gazes on her uncle. She would dearly like to make some demonstration of joy over his unexpected appearance, for Colonel Damer is one of the few people who has ever got at her hard little heart, and she has adored him from the earliest days of her neglected childhood, but her hands, if not literally tied, are very full; the youngest Miss Langton is armed with a saucepan, and carries a tray, on which butter, treacle, coarse sugar, and wooden spoons are heaped pell-mell. They are the result of a raid into the kitchen department,

and she means to beguile a dull evening by toffee-making. As she catches sight of her uncle, down goes the tray, the saucepan is thumped on the tea-table, and Dottie approaches her uncle full of affection, and is allowed to kiss him, and be talked to, and receive kind looks in return.

"I expect you're the larky one of the three, Dottie," he says, smiling, as she now proceeds to arrange her stock-in-trade on the tray. "I'll be bound you often have some game or other on hand, and are up to all sorts of mischief; while poor Pussie here is stitching away for dear life, you have nothing to do but amuse yourself! What are you about, Pussie, my dear?" says the kind-hearted Colonel, coming over to the fireplace where poor Penelope is sitting, "what is your work?"

"Only mending, Uncle Regie, mending an old jacket," and a sleeve is held up, on whose elbow a patch is being placed.

"Not a very interesting work, I should think, my dear. I expect the toffee-maker has the best of it; but surely you are taking

a great deal of trouble for nothing. That jacket seems to be on its last legs. Look here, Pussie! give it away, or get it properly sorted up by some one else, and here's a sovereign to help you to another. I suppose you too, Dottie, you little baggage, you will want one also. Well! here you are! Now don't go and spend it all on sugar-plums."

Dottie leaps up to his neck in her gratitude, like a young puppy who tries how high he can jump to reach his master's hands or face! Pussie, more self-contained and colder, puts down her needle and thread, and, with more heart and less formality than usual in her manner, thanks him as sincerely, if not as effusively, as Dottie. Colonel Damer looks at Vega for one undecided moment; but he does not feel as if he would like to hand her a sovereign as a tip, and she is thankful he does not.

"Now, Vega," he says, "we must think about what can be done to cheer you up a little. Let me see, let me see, there's no one in particular staying in the house just now. The Drummonds go to-morrow, and there

will be only young Vansittart left. Oh! and Mossop comes over for a few days. I forgot Mossop, but he's nobody at all. Well! I shall tell her Ladyship that you are all three going to dine downstairs to-morrow night. It won't be very lively for you, but it's better than eternally sticking up here. I shall make it all right with her."

"But, Uncle Regie," begins Dottie, "I am going to dine to-morrow night anyhow. Mums told me so to-day. She said that she had settled about it with Aunt Julia."

"Oh! and you meant to shine alone, Dottie, did you?" says her Uncle. "Well! they won't be in your way if I ask for Pussie and Vega also. There is no one at all to captivate, so you need not be afraid of any competition. Vansittart is not available," adds the Colonel, with a queer look in his eyes, as if he has some private joke of his own which he does not mean to divulge, "so there's no one left but Mossop! He isn't very fascinating, and I don't expect you will quarrel about him. But you may all have a

try, and you must all of you be down. Now good-bye, good-bye, I have to be off. I have any amount of things to do before dinner. Good-bye, children." And the kind, good-hearted Colonel clanks out of the room, followed by Vega's sweet looks and Dottie's adoring glances, and even Pussie's dull eyes look after him with a good deal of affection.

"I must say, Reginald," says Lady Julia to him, when her husband tells her of the guests he has bidden to the morrow's dinner, "I really must say I wish you wouldn't interfere with what doesn't concern you. Surely Hermione can manage her girls without your help; and if I had wanted Miss Fitzpatrick to dine downstairs, I was capable of asking her myself. But it is always the way. A man can never read 'au dessous des cartes,' and thinks everything is plain sailing. As a matter of fact you have upset all Hermione's plans, and she will be furious when she hears about it."

"Furious! my dear Julia, what on earth are you talking about? What consequence

can it be to Hermione, or any one else, if one girl or three come down to dinner? We're very nearly alone, or I wouldn't have dared to ask the poor things. At the same time I must tell you that I consider it a positive shame to keep them mewed up there always. They are like prisoners of State, and I can't see what possible harm I have done by——"

"I will tell you the harm you have done," says Lady Julia, interrupting him rudely: "Hermione had a particular reason for wishing Dottie to dine downstairs without the others."

"I am very sorry to have to put a spoke in her wheel then," returns the Colonel, "but what particular reason can she positively have? Why! we are practically alone. Bertie Vansittart will, I suppose, be here, but he's your especial property, and Mossop may turn up, but he's of no account."

"There's where you and Hermione differ," says Lady Julia; "she thinks he is of great account, and ever since the time he stayed

here in the beginning of winter, she has looked on him as a possible son-in-law! She declares that he paid Dottie a good deal of attention. I couldn't see it for my own part; however, he certainly talked to her a little, and played 'Halma' with her in the evenings, and sent her a large box of chocolate when he went away. I expect, though, that 'the wish is father to the thought,' in Hermione's case; all the same, on the strength of these attentions, she has made me ask him back, and there is no doubt Dottie would have a better chance of captivating him if she was seen alone and did not make one of a crowd."

"Well! of all the insane ideas, this is the most absurd," returns the Colonel contemptuously. "The idea of Dottie, a mere child, marrying at all, or rather being married to that stupid, awkward chap, old enough to be her father, a man who has risen from the ranks, and who doesn't know who his own grandfather was!"

"Pardon me, Reginald," says Lady Julia; "we know everything about his grandfather.

His grandfather was a potboy in early life, who made a large fortune in beer, and left his sons and daughters rolling in riches. Their sons and daughters, again, though not exactly millionaires, are better off than half the people in Blankshire. Beer money is as good as any other money, and the happy possessors of it are a power in the land. If our friend here, Mr. Mossop, had been an only child, instead of one of eight, he would have been made a peer by this time. It's merely a question of having a large enough fortune to be qualified to enter the ranks of the 'noblesse de finance.' His brothers and sisters have stood in his way as far as that is concerned, but even his eighth share of the beer money is quite enough to make him a 'parti'; and though I don't believe it will ever come off, Dottie would be fortunate beyond her deserts to marry a man with a clear eight thousand pounds a year, free from all drawbacks in the shape of annuitants, or hangers-on (people who have risen from the ranks never seem burdened in that way), and who has bought one of the nicest places in the county."

"And, from your point of view, the owner of all this need never be taken into consideration at all! Upon my word! women are twice as heartless as men. I can't imagine anything more melancholy than that a girl of seventeen should be sold to a man who is nearer fifty than forty, who is good-natured enough, if you like, but who is common, dull, and the most awkward lout I ever set eyes on."

"Keep your mind at ease, Reginald," says her ladyship, mockingly; "Dottie will never have the luck to have such a chance, or I'm much mistaken. But if you think the alternative—a life of shabby-genteel poverty, of constant humiliations, and disappointments; hanging on to rich people who don't care twopence for their poor relations; with Hermione for ever saving, and scraping, and finding fault,—if you think all this would be pleasanter for her, or for any one else, than life with plenty of money, a pretty home, and a harmless kind of husband, well! all I can say is, I don't agree with you."

"Which is not very wonderful, Julia,"

returns her husband. "We never agree on any earthly subject, so it's not curious that we should fall out now." And he leaves Lady Julia to her own reflections, which are the reverse of complimentary to himself, and departs to dress for dinner.

CHAPTER IX.

"Let me go over your good gifts
That crown you queen,
A queen whose empire ebbs and shifts
Each week, Faustine!"

"SINCE when has flaming yellow been considered deep mourning, Miss Fitzpatrick? It may be correct in China, or in Japan too, for all I know to the contrary; but I was not aware it had become the fashion in this country."

Lady Julia speaks in a tone of contempt, as she surveys the opposite camp from her coign of 'vantage in the long gallery.

It is a few minutes before the hour of the dinner, over which Colonel Damer and his wife have had words; but he has carried his point, and his invited guests are sitting side

by side, nearly opposite the sofa on which his imperious wife lounges.

No queen, clad in purple and fine linen, could look more regal than does Lady Julia to-night; indeed, queens in real life, and in the nineteenth century, have a way of not looking the character so thoroughly, and some of them have as simple an air as many of their subjects.

Lady Julia is more like the queen in a story-book, or an old-fashioned romance. Perhaps she owes her imperial looks to her commanding height and magnificent proportions, or it may be that the haughty expression of those dark eyes, and the toss of that beautiful head, realizes the popular idea of what a queen should be.

The shimmer of satin—the grand folds that fall in such perfect lines and sweep from the platform on which the couch is placed, down to the floor; the gleam of jewels on the bodice where no drapery hides, or no folds of lace mar, the perfect lines of the splendid figure; the string of glittering stones clasped round the firm white throat; the stars of

light that gleam in the piled masses of hair, "heavily bound up"; all these add to her imposing appearance, while they seem merely an appropriate setting for a wonderful picture.

Can such a woman, gifted with such supreme good looks, be capable of envy? Can she grudge to another a face which could never clash with, or enter into competition with her own? Must she possess everything, or, failing such a possibility, must she be devoured with jealousy? On one side is a great lady, in the full zenith of her beauty, a beauty armed at all points, and possessed of everything that can possibly enhance her charms. On the other hand is a young girl, who can never in her wildest dreams be her rival. No imperial bearing is hers, no queenly air—

> "By the dawn, and the dewfall anointed,
> She is queen by the gold on her head."

That much, and no more, can she claim, for her kingdom is not of Lady Julia's world.

On her slight, slim body are no royal robes, and the glory of colour is also want-

ing. Through the plain black frock that mounts up to the slender throat, there is just a glimmer of white shoulders and arms to break the severity of her mourning robes. And stay! there is yet another point of colour in the posy of daffodils and the few ivy leaves that the girl has arranged with the deft grace that she has learned in the country of her adoption, and that she has fastened in the front of her dress.

Who could think that a few yellow flowers and some poor leaves would look so pretty? but they seem the one thing needed to break the sombreness of the funereal black, and to give a finishing touch to Vega's simple gown.

Lady Julia's quick eye marks and notes their effect. She then and there resolves that her new drawing-room dress shall be trimmed with bunches of daffodils and wreaths of ivy! But gratitude for the idea does not make her stay her hand. She is even angry that the thought of that pretty combination should have first entered Vega's head, though she grudgingly acknowledges

to herself that the simplicity of her dress seems to make the girl look all the fairer.

Beside anything so sweet and young, she half believes that she must appear battered, artificial, over-blown. She, too, would like to be able to look half divine in a plain, black frock, with a bunch of daffodils for sole adornment.

Lady Julia grudges the girl her youth, her innocence, her golden hair, her childish contour of figure, and her sweet expression of face. She even grudges her the bunch of daffodils ; but here at least she can score, and score she will !

If she hurts Vega's feelings, and cruelly reminds her at an inopportune moment of her father's death—*væ victis*, that is all !

The blood rushes to her victim's face, as the finger of scorn is pointed to her flowers, and she looks round helplessly for sympathy, but finds none.

Pussie and Dottie, formal and uncomfortable-looking, are seated stiffly side by side on a huge divan in which they seem lost, and they would not dare by word or look

to rebel against the powers that be. Aunt Julia seems to have the power of life and limb over them all, and no consideration on earth would tempt Pussie to defy her. Dottie is made of sterner stuff, and would be capable of attempting, at any rate, to hold her own against her aunt; but she, too, has noticed how pretty the nodding heads of the daffodils look on Vega's black frock, and has wished them away.

As for Lady Hermione, her face is set like a flint; she is glad of anything that embroils Vega with her sister, and though she is wise enough to know that with the flowers or without them Vega will still be supremely lovely, she grudges her anything that adds to her beauty, be it in ever so small a degree.

Colonel Damer has not yet come downstairs, so poor Vega has no friends; for she does not even give a thought to a dull, heavy-looking man who is standing with his back to the huge fire.

"I didn't know, Lady Julia—I didn't think," stammers Vega. "I picked the

daffodils this afternoon in the wood at the end of the Deer Park. I forgot that I ought not to wear them."

Her trembling fingers unpin the "bonny breast-knot," and she crosses the room and flings it into the fireplace. It falls on the broad hearthstone, from which the stupid-looking man, who is no other than Mr. Mossop, picks it up with the tongs, and solemnly, as if he were about to offer up a burnt sacrifice, places it right in the heart of the flames.

Perhaps Lady Julia had forgotten his presence when she rebuked Vega for wearing the flowers; he is a man who is accustomed to be overlooked, and it is hard to gather from his manner whether he notices more than he is imagined to see, or not.

But Lady Julia is always pretty cavalier in the treatment of her guests, when they happen to be neither interesting, amusing, highly placed, nor her own particular friends.

They come to Conholt—"Heaven only

knows how or why they come,"—by Colonel Damer's invitation, probably—and she does not feel it "necessary" to put herself out for them in the slightest degree. They must look out for themselves, or Reginald is bound to dance attendance on them. No one could expect her to bother her head about them.

She has shaken hands with Mr. Mossop when he came into the room, spoken two sentences to him on the subject of the weather, and thinks she has played the hostess sufficiently.

No doubt he has been properly looked after, and been given a nice enough room in the bachelors' wing; the housekeeper would see that his fire was good, and that there was writing paper and envelopes in his blotting-book; while on Reginald's head must be the blame if he bores himself or is too much neglected.

Here comes Bertie Vansittart, a man after her own heart, inasmuch as he does not do things by halves, for his adoration verges on idiocy, and his admiration for her beauty

is quite unbounded. Neither of these sentiments will last, but, while they do, even Lady Julia is satisfied.

He makes for her at once to-night, looking neither to right nor left, stands silent before her for a minute, as if struck dumb at the sight of so much loveliness, and then flings himself down at her feet, and worships her in looks and words.

He is tall, lithe and handsome; the lust of the eye is satisfied, the frown leaves her haughty brow as he talks to her, and she forgets for the moment her crumpled rose-leaf, which is the presence of Vega Fitzpatrick.

Lady Hermione effaces herself; Pussie is like a poor little white mouse; Dottie's looks are lowering, and her beetle brows meet across her forehead, but whether she is ill-tempered or the reverse, happy or discontented, it is all one to her aunt; while, as for Mr. Mossop, he is to his hostess as if he does not exist.

Colonel Damer's arrival on the scene completes the party, and the procession, shorter

this time than usual, crosses the round hall and enters the dining-room.

"Who is that remarkably pretty girl?" asks Mr. Mossop, of Lady Hermione, in a discreet whisper.

The table is a long one, and Vega, who is sitting next the master of the house, cannot hear it.

"What remarkably pretty girl are you talking about?" whispers back Lady Hermione, affecting not to know who is meant.

But as his eyes are fixed in an unblinking stare on Miss Fitzpatrick, she cannot pretend to misunderstand for long.

"Oh! I see! you are looking at Miss Fitzpatrick. Well — yes — I suppose she would be called a pretty girl. I can't say I admire her much, myself. She is so dreadfully pale and thin, and there is so little of her. There is a certain amount of the beauty of youth, of course, but it won't last. That kind of prettiness never does stand any wear and tear. For my own part, I never can help looking ahead a little, and settling

in my own mind the people who will lose their looks, and the people who will keep them to the end, and I can prophesy Miss Fitzpatrick's future in one word—*nutcrackers*, my dear Mr. Mossop, *nutcrackers!*"

Mr. Mossop always loses his head when he enters into conversation with his betters; he is humble enough, and considers as such any one who is born in the purple. He is positively frightened when he talks to a peer, and even a near relation to one has the same subduing influence on him!

He is ready to believe now that Lady Hermione must know better than himself, and he would hardly trust the evidence of his own eyes against hers. That kind of woman, who really moves in the best society, and who knows all the great people in London, must surely be a good judge.

A man is so apt, as she says, to be taken in by mere prettiness; and no doubt, now that it has been pointed out to him, he can see for himself that the pretty chin may perhaps be a shade too long, and that it is possible that Vega's looks, when she is a

toothless old woman, may leave much to be desired.

But such a power of looking into the future is not granted to most people, and all the ordinary observer can see at this moment is a blonde head, *jolie à croquer*, which, in the language of a French art critic, "detaches itself admirably" from the dark velvet curtain which is drawn across one of the tall dining-room windows behind Miss Fitzpatrick.

Vega is talking to the Colonel, and her charming face is sweet, and smiling, and animated. Only Lady Hermione's eagle eye could detect a flaw in the picture.

"I suppose you must be right," assents Mr. Mossop, though rather doubtfully; it takes all his belief in the aristocracy to accept Lady Hermione's word as law this time. "It mayn't be the very highest type of beauty, but I'm glad that you consider her pretty, at any rate."

"Pretty! oh, yes, of course she's pretty," says Lady Hermione, lightly; "it's difficult not to be pretty at eighteen. Youth is a

beauty of itself" (her ladyship has evidently forgotten, as usual, the existence of her own by no means attractive children), "but one wants something more than that. One likes to see a woman with some class about her—a woman who will wear well, and who will look as handsome at the head of a table at five-and-thirty as she did at eighteen."

Clever Lady Hermione! *Mais on peut-être plus fin que le monde, mais pas plus fin que tout le monde!*

Mr. Mossop receives meekly the impression she intends to convey, and the ideas she wishes to stamp on his brain; but Dottie, who is sitting exactly opposite, and who is listening to their conversation with all her ears, reads between the lines of the last sentence, and perfectly takes in the situation. She has caught a few stray words that have passed between her mother and aunt, and she guesses that the former had just a faint hope that Mr. Mossop had been attracted by herself.

She sees that Lady Hermione is nettled by his evident admiration of Vega Fitzpat-

rick, and a feeling of jealous antipathy to her unconscious rival takes root in her own mind. She goes on listening now, for the subject is a very interesting one.

"May I ask you who she is, Lady Hermione?" says Mr. Mossop, humbly; "I only venture to do so as I have never seen her here before, and I don't remember to have heard her name."

"Which isn't very wonderful," answers Lady Hermione, who now adopts a somewhat impressive stage whisper. "She is some sort of relation to the Damers, but I think it is extremely kind of my sister, and the Colonel, to have her over here. The Fitzpatricks are not relations of whom they feel particularly proud; in fact, like the rest of the family, they had broken with them altogether, and it was a mere chance that they ran across this girl somewhere or other abroad. I don't mind telling you in the strictest confidence who she is," and the whisper becomes more fraught with meaning than ever. "She is the daughter of the notorious *Ralph Fitzpatrick.*"

Mr. Mossop makes an effort, but an unsuccessful one, to remember. He cannot bear to be ignorant of the name of any one who has been notorious among the Upper Ten; he would like to be as well posted up in every scandal as Lady Hermione herself, but this time his mind is a blank. He cannot look wise, or interested, or knowing, for he is entirely at sea!

Lady Hermione perceives his dilemma, and makes things easy for him.

"To be sure, I forgot," she says, "it must have been before your day."

As a matter of fact, Mr. Mossop is a good deal older than herself, but at the period when the London world was scandalized over Ralph Fitzpatrick's sins, and horrified at the public disgrace that fell on him, and merciless in the punishment it meted out to him, at that time Albert Mossop was a clerk in his grandfather's brewery, and a great deal more interested in the manufacture of Double XX than in London society!

"Well, there isn't much to tell you about it," she goes on, "though I have always

heard that it made a tremendous stir at the time. He was a very well-known man, good-looking and plausible, and all that; but I believe, all the same, the very best people never fancied him much,—at least so I have heard my father say, for I was but a child in the schoolroom when it all happened. He was detected cheating at cards in the most bare-faced fashion. I believe he had been at it for years, but he was caught in the end. After that, what more is there to be said? Naturally he was cut by everybody; and when England became impossible for him, he went the way of other black sheep, and crossed the Channel. Where they knocked about, or how they lived, I can't tell you. He had a wife, you know, and one child, but one never heard his name mentioned, or knew if he was alive or dead, till one day last autumn when my brother-in-law ran against him at Dieppe. The father and daughter fastened themselves on to him, and Colonel Damer is so good-natured he hadn't strength of mind to shake them off, though, as you may imagine, the

whole thing was a great annoyance to my sister. Fitzpatrick died the other day, and I believe there was a letter of some sort found, asking Colonel Damer to look after his daughter. Rather a cool request, I must say ; but what could you expect from such a man ? So the long and short of it is, we have got her over here ; and how long she means her visit to last, one can't tell."

Mr. Mossop's beady eyes are fixed on Lady Hermione as she glibly gives him her version of Mr. Fitzpatrick's fall, and of Vega's history, and he sits open-mouthed, listening intently.

He likes being confided in by her ladyship, and a society scandal from her lips, especially about any one connected in the faintest degree with her own family, fills him with breathless interest.

Does Vega's beauty seem to him to wane as Lady Hermione speaks ? Does he now notice the simplicity, almost poverty of her dress, which had not struck him before ? Does he imagine that he perceives in her the

absence of that "grand air" that distinguishes his hostess and her sister? It is quite possible, for some eyes can only see through other people's spectacles!

Mr. Mossop is not a bad-hearted man; on the contrary he is good-natured, and ready to do any one a good turn if possible. Many needy members of the peerage have had reason to bless his name, some for substantial help, and others for the trouble he has taken in indirect ways to advance their interests. He has pitch-forked one or two particularly hard-up scions of good families straight into the Brewery, where under his fostering care they have advanced by leaps and bounds, and he has been all but publicly thanked for his kindness by their relations. But, good-natured as he is, he is undoubtedly far readier to exert himself for his titled friends than for the rest of the world. His foible is "big people," and there is no denying that Mr. Mossop is a bit of a snob! It is written in pretty legible characters on his outer man, for his appearance is by no means distinguished. He is thick-set and heavily

built, and there is too much colour on his fat face; his eyes are mean and insignificant, and the "feather beds" that surround them give him a dull expression.

But, for all this, it is his clothes that damn him in the eyes of those who *know!* It is not possible for any one to spend more money, thought, or time over them than he does, but in spite of, or perhaps in consequence of, his laboured efforts, he is not a success. Everything about him is exaggerated, and is either too tight or too loose, the patterns too noticeable, the checks too large; even his cuffs and collars are too shiny, and his coats and hats too new! His studs are larger than studs ought to be, and the three coloured pearls that decorate his shirt-front to-night are pinker, blacker, and whiter than have ever been seen before!

His bouquet, straight from Covent Garden, is a triumph of the florist's skill, but it is three times too big, and the mingled ôdours of gardenias and heliotrope are overpowering. The scent on his handkerchief does not match, and at least half a bottle of "chypre"

must have been poured on it before he came downstairs!

Altogether he is a man who, in spite of the aforesaid kindliness of disposition, sets Colonel Damer's teeth on edge; and even his friend, Lady Hermione, as she sweeps across the Round Hall when dinner is over, whispers but one word in her sister's ear, and that word is *Canaille!*

The three men whom they leave behind them have not much in common, and the conversation languishes somewhat. Bertie Vansittart hardly opens his lips; he keeps silent, as much from the feeling that he does not care to smile in the husband's face, after having made love to his wife, as from the state of sentimental idiocy to which Lady Julia has reduced him. Mr. Mossop harps on about Vega Fitzpatrick. In spite of Lady Hermione, his mind is still running on her.

"Yes, yes," answers the Colonel, shortly, in answer to his inquiries, "she is a very pretty girl, and she is a cousin of my own. Her mother was a Vivian."

"Really! indeed! Colonel Damer," says Mr. Mossop, feeling much interested; "I was aware that Lord Hautaine was connected by marriage with your family, but I never had the pleasure of meeting any of them. Was Miss Fitzpatrick's mother one of his family?"

"She was his daughter. Lady Mary Vivian married Fitzpatrick. For any further information I must refer you to the Peerage."

"Then Miss Fitzpatrick is a near relation of the Hautaine family?" asks Mr. Mossop, with bated breath. The Hautaine family is one of the oldest and most distinguished in England, and the name alone strikes awe into his heart.

"Yes, yes! she's a near relation to the whole lot of them," returns the Colonel, "but the relationship has been of little use to her so far, poor little thing! Her father fell out with the Vivians many years ago, and the quarrel was never made up," he adds, with the mercy which one man rarely fails to show his fellow-man who has gone under and who is now dead.

He does not feel inclined to drag to light the old scandal, for a man like Mr. Mossop to discuss or dissect.

Colonel Damer had never been a friend of Mr. Fitzpatrick in the days when they were both young, and his sin had been one for which he could feel little mercy ; nevertheless he does not care to disinter a family skeleton, or gossip over a disgraceful story in the present company.

He changes the subject abruptly, but not before his guest thoroughly takes in, and gloats over, the information that Vega Fitzpatrick is nearly connected with the Peerage !

When they join the ladies in the long Gallery, the three men fall into their plans, and each seems to do exactly what is expected of him. Colonel Damer is soon immersed in the newspaper ; Bertie Vansittart sits at the feet of his liege lady, and they whisper and smile and flirt the rest of the evening, while Dottie Langton, who has got out the Halma-board, and set up the little men, challenges Mr. Mossop to a game.

He falls, but very unwillingly, into the trap. In vain has the net been set by the fowler in the sight of the bird! Mr. Mossop, though he plays the game mechanically, refuses to be in the least degree interested in it—does not make himself agreeable to his opponent—allows her unheard-of licence in the way of ladders—and while her red men are unmolested as they slant knowingly across the board, and advance as they like to their goal, his black ones plod steadily and hopelessly on, and he neither knows nor cares anything about them!

For he sees at some little distance from him a lovely face, and he looks at it across Miss Dottie's square shoulders a great deal more than he looks at the Halma-board.

Dottie waxes cross and sulky, and when she has won the set without a struggle on Mr. Mossop's part, she angrily rattles the men into their box, shuts up the board with a bang, and walks off in a temper.

The next day, "the blessed Sabbath," is as a rule not a particularly peaceful one at Conholt. Lady Julia, bored, and unem-

ployed, is generally in the worst of tempers. Colonel Damer, who hates pen and ink, and business in general, is overwhelmed by the accumulations of the past week, which have been put aside from one hunting day to another, and which now demand his attention. It is the day that Lady Hermione generally chooses on which to add up her unpaid bills, and study the miserable balance that figures in her banker's book, and she rails at her ill-fortune, and bemoans her hard lot, till a battle royal ensues between herself and her sister, Lady Julia loudly declaring that "Hermione" has brought her troubles on herself, and Lady Hermione protesting that she is the victim of circumstances.

This particular Sunday, on the contrary, everything seems to go on wheels; though full early in the day to say how it may end, the Church-going party from Conholt, as they walk through the leafless woods, have an air of pious cheerfulness about them which at least promises well.

Lady Julia, brave in velvet and furs, has

Bertie Vansittart for her companion and prayer-book bearer. It would be curious to count the number of young men who have carried her prayer-book to the pretty little church at the edge of the park, in the last dozen years that she has "lived and loved" at Conholt! She has changed lovers often in that time, but she clings to old ways and traditions, and likes them all to conduct themselves on much the same lines.

She has walked to church with so many; they have said their prayers side by side, have sung out of the same hymn-book, and Lady Julia, under the combined influence of love and religion, has felt calm, exalted, and a good deal better than her neighbours for half an hour at least!

Lady Hermione, in plain, almost rough clothes, looks young, lithe and active, in a gown and jacket of puritanical simplicity, which, however, sets off her fine figure in a way which anything more rich and less clinging would not do so thoroughly. She has Mr. Mossop in tow; she knows that he would never of his own accord seek the

company of her youngest daughter, and she tells herself that he must be educated up to Dottie if anything satisfactory is to come of it; so, rather than that he should fall to the lot of Vega Fitzpatrick, she draws him to herself, and he hangs on her words as she takes him to the charmed inner circle of the highest world, and tells him strange stories, in which none of the actors are under the rank of a Viscount!

The three girls cluster round Colonel Damer, and make locomotion difficult for him in the narrow path that is only meant for two; but he likes their company, is amused by Dottie's cynical remarks, and holds Vega's pretty hand in his, as they stroll along to church, judiciously keeping a good deal in the rear of the more important members of the party.

The March sun has no heat, but it shines brightly, and glints down on them through the leafless branches of beech and elm. It turns a bed of daffodils into a sea of gold, and makes the swelling buds of larch and lime look like points of emeralds. The

ribes, brown and leafless, has already put forth a few pink tassels ; the catkin's silvery feathers and velvety clusters hang on bare boughs, and among luxuriant cushions of primrose leaves may be found already a few pale flowers.

It seems like the very beginning of everything. The world is to be created once more! Winter is over and done. Spring, blessed Spring! is in sight, and "the singing of birds" is again heard in the land.

Everything that lives seems to feel new life, and wakes from the sleep of winter ; while the blood runs more merrily in the veins of the young and strong. It mantles on Vega's cheek, her eyes shine brightly, and the boisterous breeze takes sad liberties with her fair hair.

And now they hear the tinkle of the church-bell, and they leave their woodland path and enter the churchyard by a wooden door, of which the Colonel has the key. One by one they file along the narrow path that leads between the swelling mounds on either side ; there are some crosses here and

there, but few more ambitious monuments, for the "rude forefathers of the hamlet" seem to have been satisfied with but little; "a low grave studded with daisies" is all they aspired to, and even in these days of cremation it is, after all, the ideal resting-place.

The sons and grandsons of those who sleep under these mounds are standing about in the churchyard, and gather round the porch; for though the tolling of what sounds like an exaggerated sheep-bell has ceased, single strokes ring out, and till the last has been struck the men do not deem it incumbent on them to enter the holy edifice! It is not considered womanly for their wives and daughters to loiter with them; they pass into church decorously, and are by this time sitting discreetly in their accustomed places; but it is not essential, from their point of view, for their mankind to join them till the last moment. Most of these take off their hats, and all have their fill of staring, as the Conholt party pass along. Two or three very old men in smock frocks stand with bare heads, as in the presence of royalty;

for have they not seen "the Colonel's father —ay, and his father again afore him!' and were they not taught in the good old days to order themselves "lowly and reverently to all their betters," in the most literal sense of that injunction?

"None of your new-fangled notions for me," is the favourite saying of old Gaffer Drew, the eldest of these patriarchs. "We was never brought up to think one man was as good as another—ay! and a heap sight better too! *We* didn't set ourselves up agin our spiritual pastors and masters, no more nor we thought we know'd better than them as had lived longer in the world nor ourselves. But there, there, that's how it is now-a-days; 'taint the young as makes way for the old, but the old as has to make way for the young." "She do be a fine figger of a woman," is his present criticism, as Lady Julia sweeps into church; "she's as proud as the Queen on her throne, and holds up her head as high too! But I calls that right and proper, and befitting of her high station, that I do. If the likes o' them as

lives at the Park don't feel better than their neighbours, who would, I should like to know?"

"She treats us all like dirt," returns a more Republican spirit, on whose head the snows of eighty-five winters had fallen; "but it's deeds, and not words, that we poor folks want. Bless you! what good do soft words do us? We gets enough o' them from t' Parson's lady. 'How do you do, Gaffer Mursell?' says she, quite soft like; 'I 'opes as 'ow your rheumatics is better.' But nothing comes of it, not even the wherewithal to buy a pint o' yell, or a screw o' baccy—a pair o' mittens, perhaps, ivery other Christmas, but what's mittens? Now my Lady, she comes along the other day, a-driving of her black ponies, and I up and hobbles to the gate, as well as I can, to set it open for her. 'How do you do, Mursell, for ye *are* Mursell, ain't yer?' says her Ladyship, quite smart like, and afore I has time to answer she outs with her purse. ''Ere's 'arf-a-suvereign,' says she, 'to drink my health in,' and then she's off like the wind.

That's what *I* call bein' a lady, and behavin' as sich—that I do."

"We've no more time for your talk, Gaffer," says old Drew crossly, for he feels annoyed that Lady Julia's half-sovereign "should have gone to the likes of old Mursell." "T' parson's in the pulpit, we must be a-goin' in."

The church has a mouldy smell, the service is simple to the verge of carelessness, and, with the exception of the Conholt party, who have the whole gallery, in a recess on one side, to themselves, the congregation is a poor one.

Lady Julia looks down on her fellow-worshippers from her corner of the great family pew with the air of a spectator at some function in which she takes no part; she has the languidly indifferent air of a mere looker-on. Bertie Vansittart sits close to her, and gazes at her even when she bends the knee as a mere formality—a sort of travesty of prayer.

Lady Hermione continues her schemes, and the great finance question fills her mind

to the exclusion of more pious thoughts. Colonel Damer jumps imaginary fences, and remembers "big places" that he got over in some of last week's runs, instead of attending to the sermon; while the rest of the party make themselves as comfortable as possible, and survey their poorer brethren with amusement, curiosity, or contempt, as their inclination prompts them.

Their poorer brethren and sisters, for their part, cast many upward looks in their direction. Gaffers Mursell and Drew blink up at "the quality" quite impartially. One or two of the younger men nudge each other as they spy Vega's pretty face. "She be a beauty, she be," they whisper to each other. The women take stock of the clothes; and the doctor's daughter has her eyes fixed on Lady Julia's hat, and resolves to copy that masterpiece of Virot in some materials that she has at home. The small feathers that adorn it have a sheen on them the like of which she has never seen before. They take the colour of the heart of a ruby or an emerald, and have a deep metallic lustre as

the light falls on them ; but, no doubt, the same effect could be obtained by a cock's-tail plume, or a magpie's wing, and she knows how to procure both—anyhow, she means to try !

The service has been said and sung, the wooden plate has been passed from hand to hand, and has reaped a comparatively rich harvest ; the sermon has been droned through—and now the Damers and their friends are on their homeward journey. Vega feels disappointed ; for, in spite of her attempt to get to Colonel Damer's side again, she is checkmated by Mr. Mossop, who joins her, and will not be shaken off. She has no particular dislike to him—she knows him too little for that—but she feels a vague distaste for his society ; and if she cannot walk with the Colonel, she would much prefer to loiter through the woods alone.

The daffodils that nod their hardy heads in the brisk breeze—the silver birch, whose every branch seems traced with an etching-pen against the cloudless sky—the birds

that sing on the bare branches—the squirrel that nestles in the leafless arms of the great oak—even the rabbits that scuttle across the path, or dot the grass of the park—all these sights and sounds would fill her with pleasure were she free and alone; but she finds none in listening to Mr. Mossop's laboured sentences, and no interest in hearing of the grandeur of strangers who, he tells her, are her near relations.

"Lord Hautaine?" she repeats, in answer to one of his many questions. "Yes; I suppose he is my uncle, but I can tell you nothing about him. I have never set eyes on him, and I never heard my—I have hardly ever heard his name mentioned."

Mr. Mossop feels quite overcome. That the goods with which the gods have provided this girl, in the shape of great relations, should be thus ignored, fills him with actual sorrow.

He remembers an old proverb often quoted by his grandfather, "Heaven sends almonds to those who have not teeth to

crack them"; and he pictures to himself how he would have valued such an uncle! A peer of the realm has a distinct value in Mr. Mossop's eyes. He would joyfully give a handsome sum down to have one—and even the least among them—for a near relation!

"My dear young lady," he says impressively, "it is the worst policy in the world to drop your relations—and *such* relations! You should cultivate them, Miss Fitzpatrick—you should cultivate them."

Vega's laugh rings out free and joyous, as much at the earnest expression of his heavy countenance, as at the words themselves.

"And how are they to be cultivated?" she asks mirthfully. "How am I to set about the business——?"

She pauses all of a sudden. It does not seem quite so much of a joke to her when she thinks about it. It becomes, all at once, extraordinary, now that the idea is forced upon her, that she should not be acknowledged by those to whom she is bound by ties of blood, and that she should be a stranger to her mother's people.

If "the fathers have eaten sour grapes," it seems hard that "the children's teeth should be 'set on edge'"; and a bitter feeling towards those who have deserted her springs up in her heart.

It is not likely that she would confide in Mr. Mossop. Nevertheless, the sudden vein of thought that his words have struck puts pathos into her large eyes as she turns them on him, and he straightway forgets her great relations and her grievous sin in allowing herself to be dropped by them, and, for the first time in his life, he falls in love! really, genuinely in love!—in love without any idea of prudence or precedence, without reference to the peerage, and with no inforformation gleaned from the pages of that venerated book to guide him.

And who shall limit the force of the tender passion, or own its sway over those alone who are young and well-favoured?

The power of love is not so circumscribed, for the mature heart of forty-five can, no doubt, beat wildly and passionately, and old pulses, before now,

have been known to go irregularly and unevenly.

Youth, hot youth, may hold its sides and point the finger of scorn when the mature and middle-aged fall victims to that which, in their arrogance, they would reserve for themselves alone; but their mockery is unavailing. The disease is common to all, and is, indeed, most deadly when taken late in life!

What matters it that Mr. Mossop has not been cast in the mould of manly beauty—that he is not of the stuff of which heroes of romance and troubadours have been fashioned from time immemorial—that he has never in his youngest days been the beloved of women, and, indeed, on the contrary, has, up to now, been waging a successful war against the female sex, and has looked on them all as the sworn foes of a rich, eligible, and single man.

So far from loving any of them, his hand has been against every woman—against the astute and wary Dowagers who had told him so many pleasant things about himself,

who had been abnormally hospitable and kind to him, and so very confiding whenever they could throw one of their daughters into his society—against the handsome women, widowed or single, of a certain age, who had done their best to turn his pudding-head, and to bring the Lord of the Brewery to their feet —against the pretty blondes, brunettes, or auburn-locked, who had been urged on by their respective families to make up to him, and who had, in two or three instances, been all but successful. But the prey had escaped them all at the critical moment. He knew his own value, and had enough of the mercantile spirit of his late grandfather to have no intention of letting himself go under his price! If a Dowager Duchess had passed by, and had entered for the race, the prize might have been hers, for Mr. Mossop could not have resisted her advances; but as there was none available, and as for the most part the aspirants to his hand had been needy and distant scions of good families, he had stood steadfast and guarded his liberty. The Towers was

still without a mistress, and Mr. Mossop without a mate.

It cannot be gainsaid, however, that he now falls in love genuinely and frankly. Vega's beauty has begun, and her sweetness has completed, what the plots and schemes directed against him for twenty-five years failed to accomplish, while there is no doubt that the great name of Hautaine—a name to conjure with—has counted for something with him too.

"I am going away to-morrow," he says to his companion, ruefully; "but it doesn't really matter whether I am here or not, for, as far as I can see, it is nearly impossible to set eyes on you. Your cousins seem to be quite invisible, and I have been backwards and forwards constantly to Conholt lately, after hunting and that sort of thing, and I have never even caught sight of you before this time. What on earth do you do with yourselves, and where are you to be found?"

"We're kept a good deal in the background, certainly," says Vega, merrily, as

she turns her lovely, laughing eyes on his dull, inexpressive countenance—all unconscious of the flame she is fanning; "but those who seek us can find us. We're not imagined to be seen at all, but we haven't yet been given invisible jackets! Seriously speaking, we have the schoolroom to ourselves; but I don't think the visitors at Conholt are expected to come there. I am sure Lady Julia wouldn't approve of their doing so."

Mr. Mossop is quite sure of that also, but love makes him bold.

"Perhaps not, Miss Fitzpatrick, but—but—are you fond of chocolate?" he asks, abruptly. The unexpected question makes her merrier than ever.

"Of course I am," she says; "and as for Dottie, I never saw any one who could eat so many chocolate creams in so short a time."

"That will do," he answers, as triumphantly as if he had gained a decided advantage; "I will bring you and Miss Dottie the biggest box I can find the next time I

come to Conholt. Surely, that will be a kind of excuse for coming up to the schoolroom to pay you a visit. Shall I be a welcome visitor there, Miss Fitzpatrick?"

His eyes are too small and too sunk in fat even to leer. She sees no more expression in his face than was there before.

"Welcome! and with a big box of chocolate! If you have any doubt on the subject, ask Dottie. Dottie—Dottie," she calls out to the girl, who is lagging behind them sulky and alone, and to Mr. Mossop's disappointment and annoyance, his *tête-à-tête* with Vega is at an end, for the two girls chatter beside him till they reach the house, which was not at all what he intended when he offered his dole of sweetstuffs.

END OF VOL. I.

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